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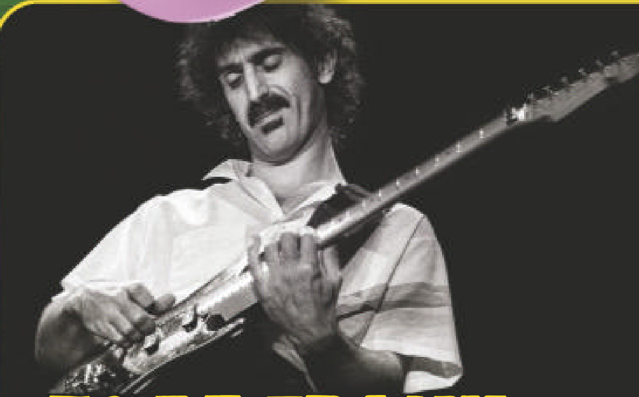

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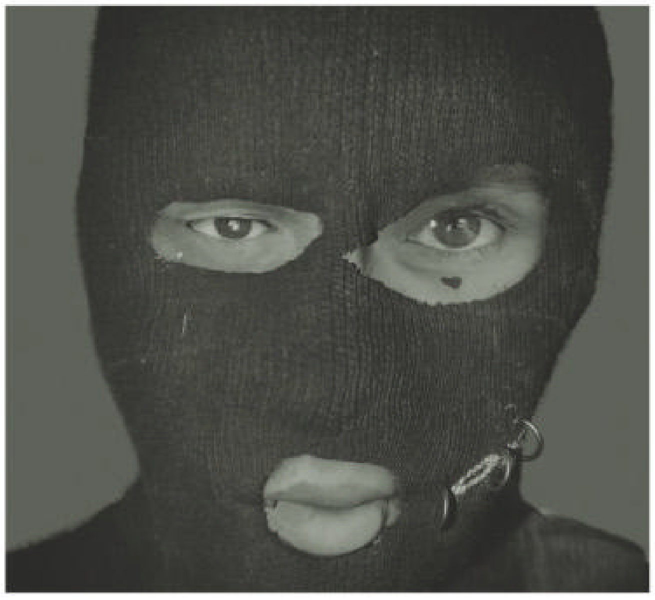
WILLOW SMITH TRADES POP BEATS FOR SICK RIFFS ON NEW TRACK

R&B singer-songwriter Willow Smith has unveiled her latest single, "Transparent Soul": a guitar-heavy track that sees the rap star take a significant sonic shift and swap intricate lyrical flows for thrash-y pop-punk powerchords. Wielding an Ernie Ball Music Man St. Vincent signature, Smith serves up a series of sweet melodic slides and oversized open-string chordal hooks over a moody bass guitar line, all of which are driven along by Barker's high-octane drum part.

Of her new punk-flavoured musical direction, Smith revealed that the upcoming album took inspiration from her mother's [Jada Pinkett Smith] nu-metal band Wicked Wisdom, which introduced her to a huge array of bands outside the R&B scene.

"I never felt like I could sing that kind of music because I was always trained to sing R&B and pop," said Smith of her hesitance to unleash her inner rock star, before noting, "I realised that it's not my voice that can't sing this kind of music. I was afraid to sing this kind of music because I was afraid of what people would think."

Citing pop-punk heroes Hayley Williams, Gerard Way and Patrick Stump as being the driving forces behind her sonic shift, Smith says the new album will showcase an artist who has made it to the other side of that anxiety. ***Words by Matt Owen***.



TOM MORELLO JOINS PUSSY RIOT FOR BOMBASTIC SINGLE

Rage Against the Machine firebrand Tom Morello has teamed up with Russian punk outfit Pussy Riot for new single "Weather Strike". The storming track opens with a heavily overdriven bassline that quickly erupts into a drop-D Morellian banger, its choruses flanked by ethereal piano verses, before a molotov cocktail of pentatonic riffs and Whammy-drenched solos bring the song home.

"Pussy Riot is one of the most radical and important activist musical groups of all time," Morello said in a statement. "Their fearless blending of art and confrontation is a constant inspiration and it's an honour to combine forces on this powerful, revolutionary track."

"Both for Tom and me politics has been always closely intertwined with our music, like two sides of a Möbius strip," says Pussy Riot's Nadya Tolokonnikova.

The release follows last month's Pussy Riot EP *Panic Attack*, with a full album scheduled for later this year. Two of the band's members, Masha Alekhina and Lucy Shtein, remain under house arrest, and face two years' jail time for supporting Alexei Navalny, opposition leader to Vladimir Putin. ***Words by Michael Astley-Brown***.

THE PEDAL DOCO YOU'VE ALWAYS DREAMED OF HAS ARRIVED

We've been eagerly awaiting the release of Reverb.com's effects pedal documentary, *The Pedal Movie*, and now the day has finally arrived. The film, which takes a deep dive into the "untold history of the pedal industry's rise", is available on select streaming services and online stores.

According to Reverb, it's the most comprehensive look at how a series of recording studio accidents in the 1960s led to the creation of effect pedals, and how those pedals and their builders changed the sound of popular music as we know it.

The Pedal Movie explores how effects and popular music have influenced each other over time, covering more than six decades of the pedal's evolution through nearly 100 interviews with the likes of Peter Frampton, J Mascis, Graham Coxon, Kevin Shields, Billy Corgan, Sarah Lipstate, Nels Cline, Steve Vai, Steve Albini and more.

Additionally, the film explores how the effect pedal industry grew from a handful of companies several decades ago to a vibrant community that has helped create not only new songs and genres of music, but new jobs, YouTube personalities, and more. ***Words by Richard Bienstock***.

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#143

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FUTURE

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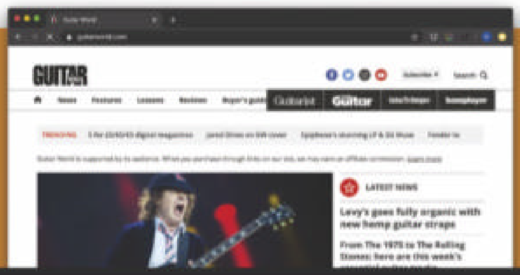

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SC3
high end speaker cable
the ultra flexible touring speaker cable
the signal masters

Photo: Andrew Basso

ACOLYTE

THEY ARE an equally operatic and eruptive five-piece from Melbourne, whose monolithic records make even the most destructive riffs feel elegant. To put it succinctly, they're the future of Australian prog-metal.

THEY SOUND LIKE a blindfolded ride on the world's most unpredictable rollercoaster. We have a theory that when people with synaesthesia listen to Acolyte, they're able to see colours that don't actually exist – the quintet will them into existence with the sheer might of their sonic volatility.

YOU'LL DIG THEM IF YOU LIKE Karnivool, Porcupine Tree, Devin Townsend, and hiking your way to the top of a mountain to stare in awe over the horizon, astonished by the widescreen beauty of the natural world… Then racing back down to thrash away in the mosh at a sweaty, rampageous metal gig.

YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT the band's powerful and polychromatic second album, *Entropy*, which landed back in May to a stream of hard-earned acclaim. Five years in the making, it's a fearless and futuristic journey through the ups and downs of prog metal in all its splashy, mottled beauty. The guitars on this thing are truly mind-bending, stacked start to finish with prickly noodling, riotous solos and catastrophic breakdowns – but it's these glassy, wailing synth pedal solos that steal the show, sounding like something out of *Doctor Who* if Steve Vai was a Dalek.

Photo: Casey Garnsey

BUGS

THEY ARE not actually all that fresh – the Brisbane pop-rockers have been jamming up a storm since 2014, and even have three full-length albums of brash and bouncy gems. But in the past couple years, they've hit the national stage with more fortitude than the Valley where they cut their teeth. If you're not already on the Bugs bandwagon, hop on before their tours start selling out in seconds.

THEY SOUND LIKE a whole damn lot of fun. Even on their most strait-laced tracks, the trio shine with a luminescent larrikin spirit – chalk it up to their massive, jammy hooks and the catchiest choruses this side of the Brisbane River.

YOU'LL DIG THEM IF YOU LIKE Dear Seattle, Dune Rats, West Thebarton, and feeling the wind ripple through your hair as you jump off a cliff's edge towards a glimmering bed of salt water. The average Bugs cut straddles that magical line between chill and exhilarating, making them an absolute must for the playlist to soundtrack your next big summer adventure.

YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT the crash-hot new single "Diamond", the chorus of which hits harder and faster than a dog does his dinner. 2019's *Self-Help* album is a veritable goldmine of hits, too, from the crunchy and kinetic "Seriously" (just *try* not to clap along to that effortlessly earwormish chorus) to the equally gruff and groovy "Shitty Weather". And if there's ever been a cover worthy of usurping the original, it's their searing spin on Mallrat's "Charlie".

Photo: Sian Sandilands

CLOSURE

THEY ARE an emo-punk powerhouse from Sydney blasting out short 'n' sweet slices of dance-worthy disarray so hot they could set a glass of water on fire. Since they started tearing shit up in 2019, the trio have conjured a wickedly ardent following in their local scene – and rightfully so – selling out shows and nabbing choice festival spots with only a few songs in the bank.

THEY SOUND LIKE that rush of frantic, convulsive energy that surges through your body when you finally beat the last boss in a video game you've spent months of your life grinding away at. It's like digital cocaine – a very apt description for Closure.

YOU'LL DIG THEM IF YOU LIKE The Beautiful Monument, Yours Truly, The Wonder Years, and sharing cheesy Twitter memes with your ex because you still want them in your life, but never actually talking because you don't want them in your life *that* much.

YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT the doughy and dynamic new single "For You", on which the band embrace their shinier side with a bright and bold melody, mightily emotive vocals and a bassline that totally steals the show. Or if you're keen to dive right into the spicy stuff, go for their 2020 double A-side of "Sink" and "Roadside Flowers", the former standing out with an explosive, heart-on-sleeve chorus, and the latter with a bridge of tastefully turbulent screamy-roars.

Photo: Somerset McGourty

GRINDING EYES

THEY ARE a mystifying crew of psych-rock shredders from Sydney wielding huge, hypnotic guitar runs slathered in reverb and overdrive, crumbly basslines and sharp, soulful singing. Between their gauzy, punk-infused hits and the searing twists of instrumental eccentricity that fill in the gaps, the trio excel at setting a mood and exploring every choppy, unpredictable peak and valley it offers.

THEY SOUND LIKE the score to a clandestine speakeasy well past midnight, where illuminati secrets flow as freely as the absinthe. You're pretty sure that's a Hollywood fat cat standing in the corner, fidgeting with a switchblade. What the f*** is going on here? Wait, where did the door go? Is this a dream? Hell? Did it just start raining? But we're indoors! Oh man, am I losing my mind!?!?

YOU'LL DIG THEM IF YOU LIKE King Gizzard, The Black Angels, Sleep (the band, not the activity), and cruising down winding roads in foreign lands as street lights flicker past in your periphery, chasing not adventure nor scenery, but a backdrop to match the opacity of your wandering mind.

YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT their equally slick and seedy new album *Taste The Monochrome*, fresh on shelves via Poison City. On it you'll find a surplus of punchy jammage and jagged, roaring solos – this is one to crank loud with the lights off, truly allowing yourself to sink into the sprawling, sinuous soundscapes of fuzzy incandescence and animated grunginess.

LOITER

Photo: Samantha Kiley

THEY ARE a six-piece feed from Brisbane serving up a spine-tingling slate of cool and kaleidoscopic alt-rock. Their tri-guitar attack is something to marvel, with Amber Hudson, Mitch Chen and Brandon Day all injecting into the mix their own idiosyncratic spark. The trio gel with a riveting chemistry – especially onstage where, rounded out with the tantalising talents of cellist Evie Cowen, their sound is enormous, yet surprisingly reined-in.

THEY SOUND LIKE a fat slice of watermelon on a hot summer's afternoon.

YOU'LL DIG THEM IF YOU LIKE WAAX, Faker, The Wombats, and heading straight from your 9-to-5 office job to the local pub, 'cause there's a new band cutting sick and you've spent all week fanging for a mosh. You don't even bother changing out of your suit – you're sophisticated, but you've got a soft spot for the joyful disarray of the underground punk scene. You're Loiter's new #1 fan.

YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT the fiery and frenetic new single "It's Not Me, It's You", which sees Hudson take over from Daryn Yeats on lead vocals (and do a smashing job of it). Hudson previously shone on the cut "Underwater Blues" from the band's 2019 EP *Alternative Sidekick*, which you should also take for a spin – partly because all three tracks on it are big, bold and beautifully groovy, but also for how they manage to cram in everything from ska to math-rock, pop-punk and grunge, all without even teetering on messy.

PINKISH BLU

Photo: Noah Sutherland

THEY ARE seconds away from kicking off the next big Australian pop revolution. They're a four-piece from Adelaide dealing in glittery, iridescent indie bops with honeyed guitars twining around crisp electro beats and charismatic vocal runs. The blokes have already made theatres swoon in support of acts like Odette, Trophy Eyes and The Rubens, and it's without a doubt that before too long, they'll be selling out the biggest rooms on their own accord.

THEY SOUND LIKE the end result of an experiment where scientists built an AI engine out of neon lights and asked it to write pop bangers. The tracks are acute and emotively charged, but there's an atmospheric and esoteric edge that makes them wickedly easy to get lost in.

YOU'LL DIG THEM IF YOU LIKE The 1975, Owl City, M83, and holding hands with your high-school crush as you watch the sun rise together after a long night of partying. *Oh shit, that's right, you've got an exam in three hours!!!*

YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT their first two singles for 2021, "Backward" and "Start A Band", the former a summery, scatter-beat head-banger with a tinge of Tiny Little Houses-esque emo grit, and the latter a festival-ready 'f*** you' to fake friends via bold, thumping synthpop beats and a cruisy rhythm guitar line. Then get around their 2020 EP, *There's No Such Thing As Good People*, where you'll sink deep into a sea of pure, unadulterated good vibes.

MUSIC BUSINESS

PLOVERS

Photo: Plovers

THEY ARE loud, angry, and downright merciless when given a chance to wreak havoc on their instruments. Based in Melbourne, the trio specialise in prickly post-hardcore and psychotropic new-wave punk, with a distinctly hi-fi sound augmenting their gloriously gory temperament. They're a force to be reckoned with onstage, too, routinely doling out a thunderous onslaught of walloping riffs and ravenous roars. They've made fans in global icons like Gang Of Four, Shihad and the Screaming Females, and it's undoubtable that they'll one day rep Australia in that hierarchy.

THEY SOUND LIKE a jalapeño martini this writer tried in an uncomfortably boujee cocktail bar in Brisbane: complex, flavoursome, intoxicating… But mostly just *really goddamn spicy.*

YOU'LL DIG THEM IF YOU LIKE Idles, The Jesus Lizard, Screaming Females, and feeling the leather on a punching bag crease with every unrepenting blow, heavy metal wailing in the background as you unload all your pent-up stresses in a lucid eruption of pure catharsis.

YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT last year's vicious and visceral five-tracker, *You Can Do Better*, which blended generous widescreen soundscapes of ripping lead guitars and grimy bass with dual-tone vocals swerving between dense, swaggering cleans and noxiously venomous yells.

SUBCULT

Photo: X Promotions

THEY ARE an enigmatic three-piece from Melbourne straddling a fine line between scuzzy DIY garage-rock and crystalline power-pop. Their tunes are the kind you can pop on and zen out to on a bad day, equally so because they're ultra melodic and effortlessly buoyant, and the lyrics hit that sweet spot where they're honest and raw, but not uncomfortably hard-hitting. We're excited to see where the band head on a longform release.

THEY SOUND LIKE a first-generation Tamagotchi came to life and set out to make Simple Plan songs sound smart.

YOU'LL DIG THEM IF YOU LIKE Jeff Rosenstock, Press Club, Wolf Alice, and impulsively dying your hair blue at 4AM on a Wednesday, messaging an old friend from primary school, "Dude, we should totally start a riot grrrl band!", then doing one shot of gin and passing out before the cold open ends on an episode of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*.

YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT both of the only two songs the band have under their belt right now, "Suffocating" and "Medicated". The former is a groovy and gauzy indie-rocker with a heartrending chorus and eruptive pseudo-pop-punk bridge, highlighting the deep, distorted lead guitar lines and angelesque vocals upfront. The latter is a shimmery skate-pop jam that simply breezes by with its inhumanly catchy, energising hooks.

Photo: Will Patston

TYNE-JAMES ORGAN

HAILS FROM MELBOURNE, VIC
PLAYS SOLO
SOUNDS LIKE SUMMERY, SOULFUL POP WITH BIG GROOVES AND EVEN BIGGER HEART
LATEST DROP *NECESSARY EVIL* (LP OUT NOW VIA UNIVERSAL)

What's your current go-to guitar?
My Martin 000-15m is my baby. It's a three-quarter-scale mahogany. I bought mine in 2014 and it's served me so well every day and at every show since. I used to watch this guy from England on YouTube and he played one. His videos had no edits and I couldn't get over the tone and look, so I just went searching. I knew it was mine from the first strum. I've got the LR Baggs Anthem pickup in there, which makes it a dream whenever I plug it in.

How did you initially fall in love with the instrument?
I was fortunate to grow up in a very musical household, but instruments didn't come into my life until the age of 14. I loved guitar and had a Casino Electric, but I was confused by the strings. On my 14th birthday my dad bought me a ukulele, and the simplicity of that instrument really opened up my mind. I spent about six months playing it every day, and then decided to step up to the guitar. It definitely came a lot quicker after jamming on the uke. I remember a few months in, I nearly quit when I was trying to learn a song and it had a Bm barre chord. Fast forward to when I was 17, barre chords were all I used. The first guitar I bought was a Maton. I saved up my pocket money for probably a year, and was so stoked when I got it. Funny story: I was playing in my room a few weeks after I bought it, and when I went to take it off, the headstock hit the metal fan on the roof and broke it. I cried for weeks.

What inspires you as a player?
I've always loved John Mayer's style and approach. I don't consider myself a 'guitarist' as such, but I would be lost without it. I learnt all my playing and techniques from YouTube videos – and I mean the very basic ones. After some time of doing that, I would go on *Ultimate Guitar* and sing the song with the chords. I know a few scales, but nothing much. Maybe one day I'll chuck a solo of mine on a record or bash one out live; but for the time being I'll keep bashing out these barre chords.

Are you much of a gear nerd?
I'm actually not too much of a whiz when it comes to gear. I was pretty much a plug 'n' play guy for a good five or so years, and it was only a few years ago that I started my pedalboard. I think I have five pedals on there. My fave is definitely my Holy Grail reverb – it's just beautiful. After spending so much time in the studio with Chris Collins, I've learnt more of what I like. My amp of choice is a '68 Fender Princeton.

Do you have any 'white whales'?
I'd love to have the Sm7b microphone that Michael Jackson used to record *Thriller*.

What would your signature model look like?
I've got a custom design I've had in my head for a few years, but I can't tell you in case someone beats me to making it!

If you could jam with any guitarist, dead or alive...
BB King. Anything he wants. I'd probably just watch him the whole time.

Photo: Oversimplified Complications

CHRISTOPHER VERNON

HAILS FROM MELBOURNE, VIC
PLAYS IN BELLE HAVEN
SOUNDS LIKE VICIOUS AND EMOTIVE POST-HARDCORE
LATEST DROP *TIME CHANGES NOTHING* (EP OUT NOW VIA GREYSCALE)

What's your current go-to guitar?
I swap between guitars regularly, but recentlyI've been playing my modified Fender Squier Stratocaster. A few years ago, I had the idea to buy the cheapest Strat I could find brand new and then get my friend Michael Harron to modify it with top quality hardware and pickups. So I just searched online and found the Strat for around $240 delivered. If you were to buy that guitar new, with the mods already included, it would be more like $1,000. It's such a nice guitar because it looks kinda cheap but feels and sounds like a very expensive guitar.

How did you initially fall in love with the instrument?
I was around ten years old when I first picked up a guitar. I found out by pure boredom that I have a bit of a natural talent for music, and the guitar just happened to be my first instrument. The first guitar that was actually mine was a three-quarter-sized nylon acoustic that my father rebuilt because it was broken and under our family house somewhere.

What inspires you as a player?
I'm a huge fan of Beau and Justin from Saosin in terms of riffs. But I think more than anything, I'm in love with how firm and consistent the right hand is on guitarists like Misha and Nolly from Periphery. I think being an audio engineer and having to focus on telling artists to play harder for heavier tunes, it's forced me to have a bit of an addiction to a solid right-hand technique.

Are you much of a gear nerd?
I think I'm a bit of one, but more in a "chasing the ultimate tone" kind of way. If I hear something I love, then I'll have to know what it is. That helps me choose what I want to use with my own guitars. Right now I'm using a DiMarzio Crunch Lab pickup in the bridge of my Strat, but I'm keen to put in a Fishman Fluence Alnico Humbucker that was used in an Ernie Ball guitar on a Deadlights track that I mixed. Whenever I'm working on a new project in the studio, we shoot out everything – guitars, basses, plectrums, amp sims, and even overdrive pedals. But I'm not huge into doing something just because it sounds different – I find that the most important thing is always going to be how well you can play something, and whether a song is actually good.

Do you have any 'white whales'?
Right now I'm eyeing off a custom-built Balaguer guitar with an Evertune bridge that I created on their site. I've wanted an Evertune for so long, I can't believe I somehow don't have one already.

What would your signature model look like?
I love Strat and Jazzmaster bodies – or any body that is slightly less chunky than a Jazzmaster and looks a tad more modern. It definitely can't have a Floyd Rose bridge. It would have to be relatively light in weight and most likely have some Fishman Fluence pickups. Or if I could work with someone to create a good middle-ground between two types of pickups I like, that would be cool. I prefer single coil neck pickups for clean tones, but I always stick with stock Fender pickups for that. I also prefer six strings, and it would have to be a slightly longer scale as I play in Drop B tuning for Belle Haven. There would be no need for a tone knob – I can't remember the last time I actually used a tone knob below 10.

If you could jam with any guitarist, dead or alive...
For me it's a hard pick between Tom Searle from Architects (RIP) and Nolly Getgood. I'd probably want to write an obnoxiously fast, palm-muted, chuggy riff with them, and jam that for a few hours. That would make me smile.

Photo: Sabrina Gutierrez

ROSIE TUCKER

HAILS FROM LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA USA
PLAYS SOLO
SOUNDS LIKE WIDESCREEN INDIE WITH A WRY FOLK BITE
LATEST DROP *SUCKER SUPREME* (LP OUT NOW VIA EPITAPH)

What's your current go-to guitar?
I play a Fender Stratocaster with a humbucker on the bridge pickup, purchased from a Sam Ash in the suburbs around 2009. It's yellow – *painfully yellow* – and I love it because it's the guitar I know best.

How did you initially fall in love with the instrument?
I think my first guitar was a super, super cheap Yamaha acoustic starter guitar from that same suburban Sam Ash, purchased when I was 13 for a music class at school. No glamour or history, but still life-changing.

What inspires you as a player?
As a late teen I was really into folk music, so I played a lot of flat-picking and fingerpicking. Anais Mitchell is known for her songwriting, but she also has a very distinct claw-hammery guitar style that I found to be very inspiring. As I got a little older I got into mathy stuff – I was listening to TTNG and Toe and those types of bands, but I was mostly playing bass. These days, when it comes to writing, I find myself looking for tunings that inspire simple, memorable chord shapes; never more than the lowest four strings on the guitar. I like big, stupid powerchords that still feel personal. I like to allow my vocal melodies to elaborate on the underlying harmony. If I'm writing guitar parts for a record, they're probably informed by my deep abiding love for the wiry single-note melodies of psychedelic Cumbia music, à la *The Roots Of Chicha*. I am, fortunately, not the only guitarist who plays on my records.

Are you much of a gear nerd?
I'm am not. I understand that people love to collect gear as a hobby on its own, and there are certainly musicians who have an ear for the distinct differences in timbre between comparable reverb pedals, or vintages of a particular guitar. Even so, gear is expensive, and a good piece of musical equipment should give you a lot to work with for a long time. Like I said, some musicians are experts and aficionados, but I've encountered plenty of people with expensive pedalboards who aren't very musical at all. I do think I would enjoy building a pedal at some point. Electronics are a totally alien realm to me, and I have had a lot of fun cruising the internet for explainer videos and little breadboard synth kits to build.

Do you have any 'white whales'?
Yes! I do! Keith Armstrong, who mixed my third album, has a teal Danelectro baritone guitar that I *cannot* find online. It's a solidbody (mine is semi-hollow), and it's got kind of a square headstock with the tuning pegs on both sides. Did I mention it's teal? Keith knows it's special, too. Decidedly not for sale.

What would your signature model look like?
Two necks, plastic body… Okay no, but the truth is I have no idea. I follow a luthier named Leila Sidi (TunaTone Instruments) and if you told me to come up with a custom guitar, I would just contact her as quickly as possible, because she makes beautiful instruments.

If you could jam with any guitarist, dead or alive…
Maybe Frances Quinlan of Hop Along. The guitar on the Hop Along records is frenetic and mind-blowing. Or the band Black Ends – or Screaming Females, who I'm sure Black Ends get compared to. I would want to make a big, giant, freaky guitar art piece with any of them, record a million angry and tight riffs to mix and match and layer on top of one another, like a big modular electric guitar orchestra that anyone could compose with. Or whatever. I'm open to ideas.

Photo: Ruby Boland

ASTON VALLADARES

HAILS FROM ADELAIDE, SA
PLAYS IN TOWNS
SOUNDS LIKE INSTANTLY INFECTIOUS POP-PUNK
LATEST DROP "SWIMMING" (SINGLE OUT NOW INDEPENDENTLY)

What's your current go-to guitar?
It's basically a 2001 MIM Fender Stratocaster with one Seymour Duncan Invader in the bridge and one volume knob. I love it for sentimental reasons, but also putting it down to the bare minimum keeps me creative when I'm writing and playing because there's less decisions to make – I just get to enjoy playing.

How did you initially fall in love with the instrument?
My grandfather was a full-time musician, and it always inspired me how he got do something he loved all day. So I always had guitars around growing up, and my grandfather showed me one or two chords and said, "Go for it." I loved that I didn't have a strict technique to follow, because it meant I didn't have to sit in a box and worry about my method. My first guitar was a Squier Buller Stratocaster in Daphne Blue; it's what I always saw bands playing, and my grandfather owned a couple so it was an easy choice.

What inspires you as a player?
Blink-182 are my biggest influence for many reasons. I've always loved being able to use a guitar to play all the songs I liked, and luckily for me, Blink songs were easy. I spent most of my time learning how to down-pick as fast as I could, and I honestly still do that whenever I can. I think I'm very particular about a really heavy-driven sound and a very clean sound when it comes to my playing and songwriting. Being the only guitarist in my band has made me become a very dynamic player to make it as interesting as I can for anyone seeing us live.

Are you much of a gear nerd?
I've become extremely obsessed with pedals over the last few years; it's such a rabbithole, and I love knowing how pedals have changed throughout history. I've somehow acclimated two shelves of pedals I can't let go of. It's starting to take over my life a little too much. My dessert island pedal would be the Hungry Robot Wardenclyffe – it's a chorus/vibrato/LFO/filter/pad reverb concoction that I love to death; probably the only pedal I've sat and played with on its own for four hours straight.

Do you have any 'white whales'?
Probably the most unattainable at this point is a Gibson ES-335 in, like, a worn cherry finish. I also love the Bilt SS Zaftigs. I've seen a few original Fender Starcasters go up on Reverb and they're always extremely expensive, but one day would be a dream come true to own. Something more just tricky to find is the red ProCo RAT pedal. I have a red pedalboard, so having a red RAT on there would make my eyes and ears smile.

What would your signature model look like?
I've already got this thought out 1000 percent. I don't care who makes it, but if you can, please hit me up. It would be a Thinline Jazzmaster-style guitar in either Daphne or Sonic Blue with a white tort pickguard, two Lollar P-90s, a three-way selector, one master volume and one master tone, Starcaster headstock and rosewood fingerboard. Normal full-length scale, six strings, and it has to plug in and make sound. I'm a sucker for some cream binding around the edges, too.

If you could jam with any guitarist, dead or alive…
My brain told me to say John Lennon, but I've actually seen him yell at his bandmates so let's give that one a miss and appreciate from a distance. I always have fun playing with any guitarist. I'm in a two-piece band, so I play alone a lot of the time anyway. Albert Hammond Jr. seems lovely and the way his Strat sounds is magical, so I'd happily play the rhythm to "Last Nite". That counter rhythm thing in the verses sounds wicked cool.

CRY CLUB (Photo by Jess Gleeson)

SLOWLY SLOWLY (Photo by Georgia Moloney)

YOURS AND OWLS

WHEN: **SATURDAY APRIL 17TH + SUNDAY 18TH, 2021**
WHERE: **THOMAS DALTON PARK, WOLLONGONG NSW**
REVIEW: **MATT DORIA**

After the past year of cancellations, routine postponements and general dream-crushing, it felt indescribably euphoric to boogie at a proper, full-fat outdoor music festival. Yours & Owls' hotly awaited return to Wollongong marked the first large-scale, free-roaming festival on NSW turf in over a year – there were some minor hiccups, as to be expected, but nothing could dampen the excitement of spending a day in the sun, soaking up the vibes and revelling in the energy of Australia's biggest and brightest live acts.

To comply with government-sanctioned COVID-Safe guidelines, the festival was split into four colour-coded sections, each with their own entries and exits, bars, food trucks and amenities. There were definite upsides: shorter lines and more space to move around, plus a more cohesive and calculated layout that eliminated the need to race between stages to catch our favourite bands. But there were a few minor downsides, too.

Sandwiched in the middle of Thomas Dalton Park was a dual-stage setup where bands performed on oversized lazy Susans. Each section of the crowd faced one side of its respective stage, with performers constantly in motion to reach all four quadrants of rowdy punters. But while this meant we could see and hear every act on the main lineup, it also meant a good deal of the sets were spent watching bands from awkward angles, and we had to catch half of them play either from an uncomfortable distance, or on LCD screens.

Aside from the two main stages, the local legends at Rad set up some wonderful showcases of up-and-coming acts in dedicated zones. The only caveat here was that each section had its own dedicated Rad stage, meaning only the punters in that section could enjoy its respective lineup. This meant we missed out on some choice acts like Towns, Dregg and Party Dozen.

Of course, these were all necessary compromises to make sure Yours & Owls could even go ahead – we'd certainly much rather a hemmed fezzie experience than none at all. And the crew did an absolutely *phenomenal* job bringing the whole shebang together, making for what was undoubtedly one of the year's most unforgettable weekends. We could dance, we could drink, we could thrash our heads and pump our fists... Yeah, we'll never take another music festival for granted. This is what *home* feels like.

DAY ONE

Rocking up early on Saturday arvo turned out to be a smart choice, as the Canberran luminaries in **Teen Jesus And The Jean Teasers** packed their half-hour showcase tightly with infectious '90s-esque power-pop hooks and angsty punk riffage. We've noted this in prior issues, but it truly bears repeating that Anna Ryan and Scarlett McKahey wield a jaw-droppingly virtuosic chemistry as guitarists – the grungy, grimy jut of Ryan's Telecaster meshed with McKahey's sharply rounded SG bends like butter melting over fresh toast. Delightful. One day Teen Jesus will be headlining festivals like these.

The groovy, opalescent art-rock stylings of **Shining Bird** made for an enthralling – if a little polarising – twist in the vibe. The local blokes swerved between brisk, prickly bites of indie-pop and gauzy, downright hypnotic passages of Floydian instrumental prog-rock. The amount of curveballs they threw us in 30 short minutes was extremely impressive; if nothing else, Shining Bird delivered the most unpredictable set of the entire weekend. Of course it certainly helped that they sounded fantastic, too.

Hot on the heels of their landmark 2020 debut, *God I'm Such A Mess*, **Cry Club** were an absolute must-see. It's a shame, then, that their set was pillaged by tech issues – their setup was fried before Jono Tooke could strum his first glittery, overdriven riff – but even with a botched mix in mono sound, the power-pop duo burst to life like theirs depended on it. Frontperson Heather Riley took full advantage of their rotating platform, buoyantly bounding around every corner with unremitting aplomb. If their forthcoming headline tour is half as good, it'll be one for the history books.

After three back-to-back hip-hop acts, the Melbourne punks in **Clowns** hit especially hard. It was quite obvious the Yours & Owls crowd was not their typical fare: the five-piece launched into a cataclysmic cyclone of thundering fret abuse and wall-rattling howls to a sea of scrunched faces; but if any hardcore band could baptise a flock of rap devouts into the church of the dark arts, it was going to be Clowns. Two songs in, horns were raised high and hair was thrashing in every direction. Cam Rust and Jarrod Good ruled the mix with their chainsaw riffage, duelling it out with the force of a thousand sweaty, slightly drunk suns.

The Vanns made for a perfect soundtrack to our golden hour zen-out wielding a loveably loose slate of brisk and bubbly indie-rock. Their cover of Bon Iver's "Hey Ma" was an especially tasty treat, conjuring a spirited singalong that made a snack out of Jimmy Vann's own enigmatic lead vocal. Vann and co-strummer Cameron Little shone with their slick, honey-sweetened fretwork, blending cool and cruisy noodling with angular rock 'n' roll wallops.

A time-tested festival favourite – and for good reason – **The Smith Street Band** landed hit after hit, from old-school classics like "Young Drunk" to recent gems like "Death To The Lads". The pub-school titans came prepared for the microwave-esque stage, setting up in an actual circle so that no matter where you were angled, there was always at least

TEEN JESUS AND THE JEAN TEASERS (Photo by Ruby Boland)

DMA'S (Photo by Ian Laidlaw)

one member to lock eyes with. Wil Wagner was in exceptional form – we've seen the Smithies play a dozen or so gigs over the years, but never has the frontman been as bright, energised or tight with his performance as he was at Yours & Owls.

Our hard-earned buzz tanked hard with **Winston Surfshirt** and **Dope Lemon**, both trodding along with tediously bloated sets of dull, uninspired indie-rock, played with the kind of apathetic flatness that forced us to ponder: have we finally lost touch of what's hip and fresh, or were these just jarringly weak performances? A quick check-in to YouTube calmed our fears – they just had an off night. Fingers crossed for next time, right?

Britpop revivalists **DMA's** did a cracking job of reinvigorating the mood, closing out the first day's six-stringed syllabus with a riveting showcase of soaring grooves and summery jamming. Johnny Took's emphatic acoustic strumming stood out in the mix, adding a spry levity that kept us hooked for every last second of the band's set. Highlights came in the handful of cuts from their 2020 album *The Glow* – the stylistic leaps they take on the record translated wonderfully to the stage, with the band tangibly stoked to finally bust them out for such a massive crowd.

DAY TWO

If there's one thing we certainly didn't miss about outdoor music festivals – particularly those here Down Under – it was the blaring sun. Trust us when we say it was *hot* on Sunday afternoon; what a good day it must have been to have stock in Coopers. We admittedly f***ed ourselves over a bit by getting lost on the way to the festival grounds – mostly because one of our new favourite bands, Adelaidian pop-punk stalwarts **Teenage Joans**, kicked off the jaunt with a full jam-through of their new EP, *Taste Of Me*. If the snippets we caught on Instagram are anything to go by, they absolutely smashed it.

Catching the latter half of an ethereal set from **Greta Stanley**, we were instantly whipped away in a haze of woolly, crystalline melodies. Stanley's radiant singing flooded the pastures; her backing band was sharp and not a beat off key, but allowed her to shine unrestricted. And goddamn, how she did.

Yours Truly cranked the energy up to 11 with their loud and lively pop-punk blitzkrieg. It's hard to believe they only dropped their debut album last September – the Sydney quartet tore it up with the breakneck fury of the genre's greatest, slamming through a reel of highlights from Self Care with every boisterous hook and belting riff thrashing from the PA like a bolt of lightning. The energy from singer Mikaila Delgado was utterly infectious, too – she sank into every line as though it might have been her last, capering around the stage with the fluidity of a Disney animation.

Wielding a mustard yellow hollowbody with a tenor as beautiful as her lead vocal, **George Alice** brought Yours & Owls to a standstill with her buttery smooth indie-pop stylings. It was simply impossible not to smile as she rolled through a stacked setlist of hits (including her breakout gem "Circles", which clicked instantly her fast-blossoming crowd), making 30 sunny minutes in a park feel like a weightless cruise down a dreamy labyrinth.

Children Collide took to the stage with fire in their eyes and chaos in their fingers, pushing the speaker setup to its absolute limits with their raw, ravenous shredding. The tunes themselves were actually oddly chill – the Melbourne trio dealt in breezy psychedelic pop jams, spun through a web of six-stringed insanity. All the while he was wreaking havoc on his Jaguar, Johnny Mackay delivered some of the festival's tightest and most captivating vocals.

But when it came to convulsive, balls-to-the-wall energy, no band could reach the riotous highs of the ultra-melodic maniacs in **Slowly Slowly**. Their punchy, hook-laden alt-rock made even the most stoic amongst us bop their heads; alongside his doughy pseudo-emo lead vocals, Ben Stewart held down the mix with his tight and tasteful Rickenbacker shredding, while Albert Doan filled in the gaps with a dry, P-90-flavoured crunch. With a setlist heavy on cuts from both parts of their Race Car Blues epic, the Melbourne foursome proved they're more than suited to lead Australia's rock scene in the years to come.

We only caught a glimpse of **Cosmos Midnight** – the smell of the gourmet hot dog truck was simply too overpowering, and dinnertime was just around the corner – but the funky, playful guitars and shimmery keys were more than enough to make it crystal clear, the hype around these Sydney-native stunners is well, well earned.

Hockey Dad, on the other hand, are one act whose appeal has never struck us. And though we'll admit they've got some damn catchy choruses under their belt, overall their set of scratchy, snappy indie-punk felt messy and lifeless. There are countless other Australian bands doing what Hockey Dad do except so much better – we don't get how the local duo are still copping such high billings.

Wrapping up a weekend for the ages with their surfy, off-kilter indie-rock, **Lime Cordiale** delivered good vibes in abundance, breezing through an intoxicating spread of scorchers from their mammoth debut album, 14 Steps To A Better You. Though looking damn schmick clad in suits, the Sydney fivesome seldom took themselves seriously, revelling in a bright and upbeat atmosphere their crowd embraced wholeheartedly.

ag TOP PICK

SLY WITHERS

Gardens

DEW PROCESS

SLY WITHERS
GARDENS

In the five years since we first heard their self-titled debut, Sly Withers have undergone a seismic transmutation. Gone is the dirty, loose 'n' livid shredding and abrasive DIY tracking – the cuts on that first record still pack a punch, but in comparison to the Perth quadrant's current output, they feel like demos laid down on a MacBook. If the 2019 EP *Gravis* was a soft reboot to the adventures of Sly Withers, *Gardens* plays out like the big-screen adaptation – huge emotional stakes, captivating story beats and seven-figure production.

Instantly striking is how dynamic and three-dimensional the LP is; the band wade through a jungle of peaks and valleys across its 12 tracks, ebbing and flowing between heartrending slow-burners and big, mosh-ready punk anthems. The guitars are tighter, brighter and more tasteful all-round, with fretmasters Sam Blitvich and Jono Mata wielding an admirably ironclad chemistry.

On the moodier and more emotive tracks – like the strained and achy "Glad" or poignant "Turns Out" – the lead work is prickly and warm, cutting turf for the pensive musings on the vocal front to really cut deep. But on songs like "My Bullshit" or "Constant Wreck", the riffs and ruminations are in mortal combat, dense and driving riffs jutting up against angular, angst-driven vocal hooks that weigh as heavy on the mind as they will on cranked stereos.

It's doling in these riveting emo-punk jams that Sly Withers truly shine. Don't get us wrong, the ballads hit hard and are tangibly stirring – but this is a punk record at is core, and such is unequivocally clear on rip-roaring scorchers like "Breakfast" and "Bougainvillea". It's hard to picture that once fans settle in with *Gardens*, the band will ever play a show without "Positives" bellying up a thundering chant-along. Too, when sets open on "Cracks", the 40-second lead-in will most certainly pave way for some truly convulsive circle-pits.

An easy highlight tucked in the record's middle, "Sleep On The Weekends" is its own beast entirely. We start with a dreary, reverb-soaked acoustic passage and a pained, monochrome lamentation. Over two minutes, the band creep patiently into a grungy, mid-energy canter – before slamming into an absolute cyclone of a climax, both singers howling with palpable ardour as the guitars belt and drums clatter at full force behind them. It's powerfully impassioned showpieces like these that really set Sly Withers apart from their contemporaries.

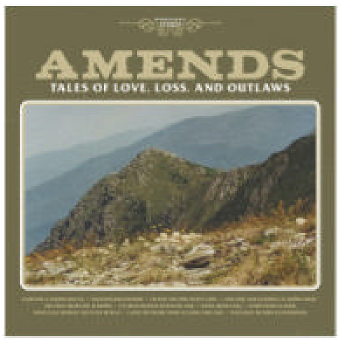
Effortlessly galvanising the foursome as the clear frontrunners for Australia's new-gen emo kings, *Gardens* is a bold, widescreen punk epic well worth diving into.

WORDS: MATT DORIA

AMENDS

Tales Of Love, Loss, And Outlaws

RESIST



Meddling fierce emotional strain with raw, whiskeyed angst à la belting blues-rock riffs, Amends hit a staunch ream of jaw-dropping highs on the suitably titled *Tales Of Love, Loss, And Outlaws*. It's impressive, the dexterity with which the band play into the smokiness and sleaze of their Southern influences – hadn't we known any better, we'd swear these Western Sydney vagabonds were hard-worn Nashville lifers. The tense emo slick they pierce it with fits unyieldingly, too, injecting into the mix a pertinent sense of umbrage and despair that makes their songs infinitely more impactful. Top-loaded with hits, our choice pick is the Laura Jane Grace-starring "Walking Backwards", a barnyard banger carried by bold and balmy semi-hollow jutting, roaring harmonicas and deeply emotive, duelling vocals.

BEABADOOBEE

Our Extended Play

DIRTY HIT

*beabadoobee
last day on earth

Brought to life on the idyllic English countryside, it's quite fitting that *Our Extended Play* revels in a summery, effervescent essense of playfulness; opener "Last Day On Earth" is dreamy and wistful, pairing nicely with the subtle lap-steel twang on "Animal Noises". The jagged riffage and dense, glitchy production on "Cologne" makes it stand out between the two softer cuts, but it doesn't sound out of place at all. The record en masse is cohesive, but each track illuminates a disparate angle of Beabadoobee's prismatic musicality. Lucid is the input from Matty Healy and George Daniel (of The 1975), who co-wrote all four tracks on the EP; their folky, pseudo-whimsical indie-pop zest seeps through in different ways, but thankfully never takes the spotlight from Bea's own idiosyncratic character.

DROWN THIS CITY

Colours We Won't Know

UNFD

By way of her rich, incandescent storytelling, Drown This City frontwoman Alex Reade seeks the beauty in darkness. It's with this in mind that *Colours We Won't Know*, the landmark new EP from the Melbournian metal warriors, truly clicks: at once ethereal and acerbic – halcyon and silvery, while steeped in raw, ravenous savagery – the record spends 20 mind-melting, boundary-breaking minutes freezing its listener in a trance. It's a paradoxic onslaught of brutally distorted, downtuned riffs and concrete-shattering roars accented with angelic, soaring melodies over which Reade beams radiantly with a voice suited more for the opera than a mosh pit. Repeat listens are crucial to appreciate these layered and luminous soundscapes.

FELICITY URQUHART & JOSH CUNNINGHAM

The Song Club

ABC

FELICITY URQUHART
& JOSH CUNNINGHAM
The Song Club

Though each of its 11 cuts were penned as part of a songwriting challenge for which the LP is named, not a word nor a strum of *The Song Club* feels even mildly haphazard. Urquhart and Cunningham wield an incandescent chemistry with their honeyed yin-yang vocals, soaring over a bright and vibrant palate of acoustic guitars wavering between summery and dry. The soundscapes are warm and feel lived-in, with an emphasis on minimalism and rawness to allow the couple's natural, duly emphatic talents to shine. It's a hopeful record, not only in its lyrical themes but in the honest and animated performances. And there's plenty of stylistic terrain explored, from the rowdy and joyful "Spare Parts" to the goosebump-inducing "Rain Fall".

PAPER CITIZEN

Wandering Ghost

INDEPENDENT

WANDERING
GHOST
PAPER CITIZEN

On her poignant and prismatic third EP as Paper Citizen, Claire Gohst delivers a riveting slate of bold, punchy alt-rock hooks slathered in overdrive, soaring and impassioned singing that tears through the mix with electrifying aplomb, and even a slither of dreamy, weathered acoustic folk balladry. Despite running just short of 20 minutes, Gohst unfurls a sprawling musicality on the disc, taking listeners on a soulful and sinuous journey that starts powerfully with the brash and boisterous six-string calisthenics of "Scratching The Surface", dips into a jammy power-pop lustre with "Lifeline", then winds into the deeply emotive, heartrending blossom of the filmy "Indigo September" and hypnotic, slow-burning "Won't Be Losing Sleep". We're dying to see what Gohst can achieve on a full-length album.

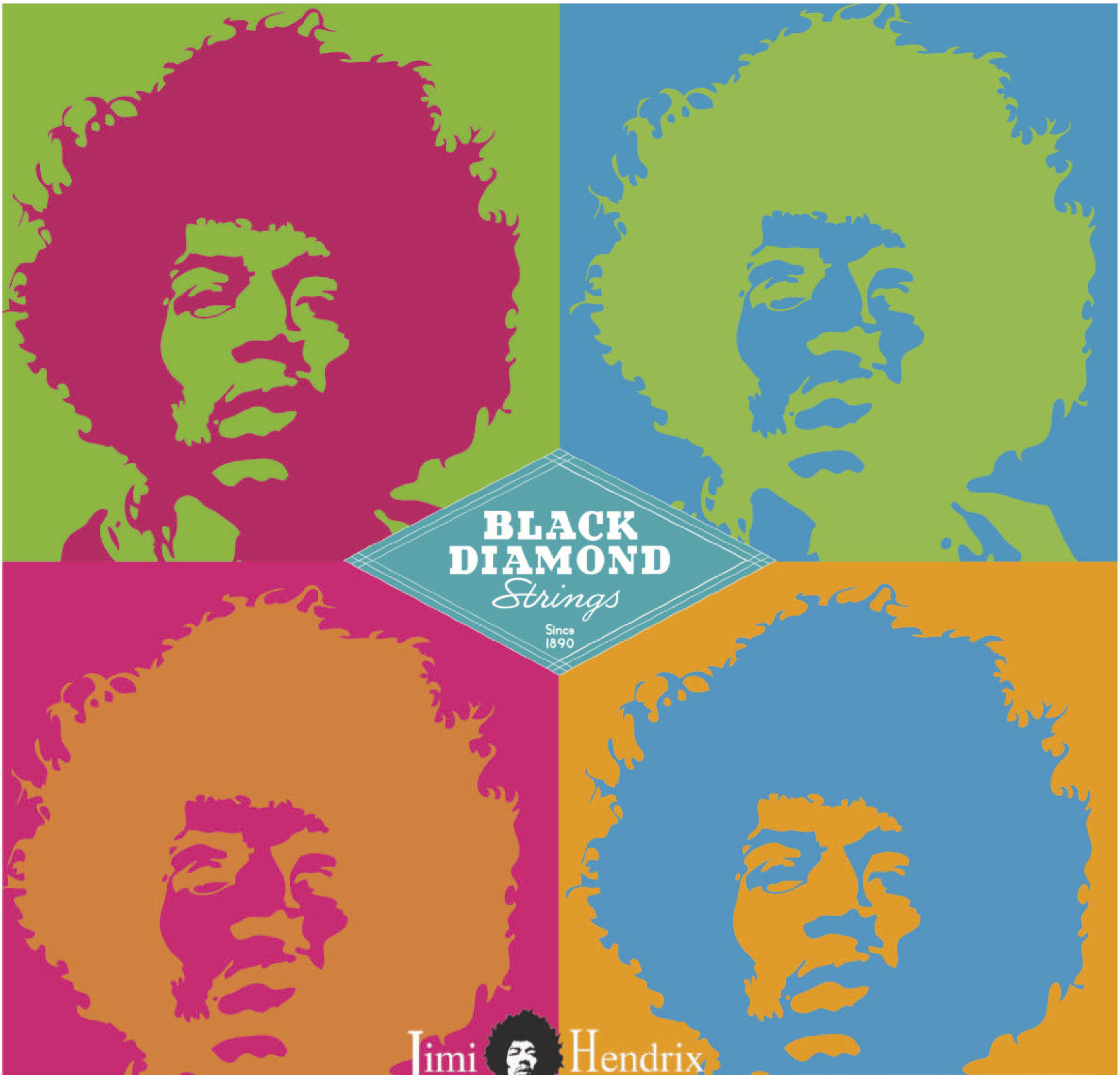
THE SMALL CALAMITIES

Moments Of Impact

INDEPENDENT

MOMENTS OF IMPACT

Even at an hour long, The Small Calamities only left us wanting more with the equal-parts offbeat and opulent *Moments Of Impact*. Not a second is wasted on this unwaveringly bold and kaleidoscopic journey through genre, teetering between simmering midwest emo and a bright, folky twang, with enchanting tinges of Van Morrison-esque diner-pop and scruffy '90s-channelling pop-punk. Guitars on the record are mostly sweet and summery, lingering with a tasteful touch of crunch – and the interplay between them and a horn section, keys or a whistling fiddle is always effortlessly hypnotic. It's the buoyant and booming singalongs that we're drawn to most – "Pavlov" and "Fairy Lights", in particular – but there truly is something for everyone here.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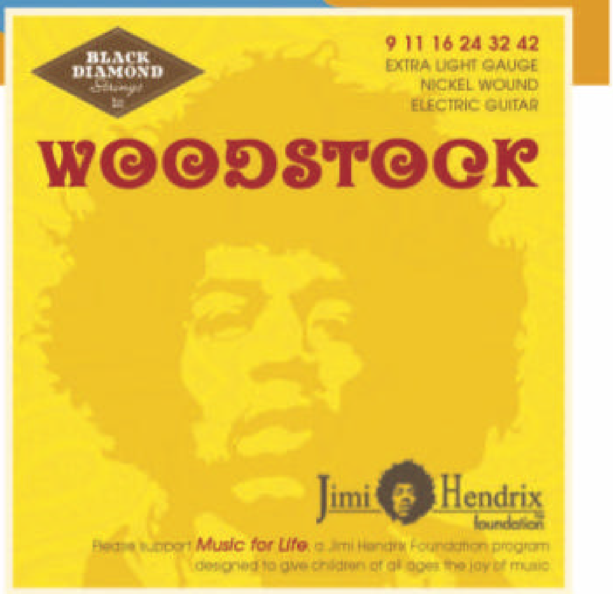
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THE TASTE OF THE FUTURE

TEENAGE JOANS ARE ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING NEW NAMES IN AUSTRALIAN ALT-ROCK. AND WITH THEIR PUNCHY AND POWERFUL DEBUT EP, THEY'RE MAKING AN IRONCLAD CASE FOR THEIR EVENTUAL REIGN AT THE TOP OF THE FOOD CHAIN.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **SAMUEL GRAVES**.

It's telling how, in a time of unanimous distress, Teenage Joans were able to bring a distinct wallop of genuine, spirited excitement to Australia's up-and-coming rock scene. They'd built a hearty local following in Adelaide throughout 2019, but with their wry and mighty 2020 single "Three Leaf Clover", the perseverant duo burst onto the national stage. They deemed themselves underdogs in the year's Triple J Unearthed High competition, but for those of us watching from the sidelines (*AG* previously championed Teenage Joans in the #138 Fresh Frets column), it was no shock at all when they scored the grand prize.

Riding that high right into the stratosphere, Teenage Joans take another powerful leap forward with their debut EP, *Taste Of Me* – which, as its title hints, takes the listener on a rollercoaster ride through all the peaks and valleys of their incomparable sound. The guitars are loud and lively, frontwoman Cahli Blakers diving down on her Telecaster fretboard with meteoric force, all the while doling enormous vocal hooks onto which she lays herself bare.

On a short break from shredding up a storm to sold out theatres with The Chats (in training for their own run of monster gigs later in the year), Blakers caught up with *Australian Guitar* to chat about how *Taste Of Me* came to be, why the live show is crucial to Teenage Joans' creative genesis, and the reason she could never pull a Phoebe Bridgers on her beloved Tele…

How did you want this record to encapsulate the spirit and ethos of Teenage Joans?

We put everything into this EP. We were in the studio for nearly three weeks, I think – which doesn't sound like a lot, but for five songs, it definitely is. And when you're in there all day, every single day, working on the same thing for hours… I feel like I went a bit crazy in there *[laughs]*. But I mean, we just put in all the weird bits of ourselves, we've put in all of our chaos, and we're so, so stoked on how the EP turned out. It's very colourful and very chaotic, but still kind of cool. And I guess it's called *Taste Of Me* because it is a taste of us – it's the first full release that we've ever done, and… It's our baby. There's nothing I would change about it.

You guys have described yourselves as "juice box punk-pop". What's the story behind that?

I think we invented that little slogan because the binary of genre is just so small, and 'pop-punk' is such a small box. And especially nowadays when every genre of music is so accessible, it doesn't make sense to have those boxes. I guess we didn't want to fall into the pop-punk box because… Well firstly, I don't think we're 100 percent authentic pop-punk, but there's also a bit of a stigma around it. There are a lot of toxic men in the pop-punk scene, and we don't want to fall into that sort of toxicity. But we do recognise that we are pretty close to pop-punk in sound.

We made it rhyme with 'juice box' because we've used that term in the past to describe the youthfulness of our lyrics. We try to write about real struggles and real problems, but in a more fun, easy-to-consume way, so that everyone can relate to it.

How quickly did this EP come together between the two of you?

We're actually pretty fast writers when we're both together. When I'm on my own I get nothing done, because I hate everything I do. But I think that's why this band works so well – I usually start a song in my bedroom by myself, and then I take it to Tahlia and she helps me finish it. And we'll usually finish it together in the span of a few hours, once we sit down and actually put our heads together. But I don't think a song is every truly done as soon as we've finished writing it.

The last song on this EP, "Therapist" – this is the second recording of it. We first recorded it when we did "Three Leaf Clover" and "By The Way", which were songs we'd had for a few months – but we wrote "Therapist" just before the recording session, and it just didn't work out. I think it was mostly because we hadn't played it live yet. The live show is such a huge part of Teenage Joans – we're so proud of it, and I really think our songs take on a life of their own during the show, without us even consciously realising it. We just do different things and slip into new habits with the song that, after a while, just makes it what it really is. So I think it usually takes a few months for a song to reach its truest, best form, and become ready to record.

And then obviously there's the recording process, the mixing and mastering… It can take a long time! These songs took almost two years in the end.

Let's talk gear! What guitars were you ripping out on for this record?

I have my US Telecaster, and that's my baby. I named her Courtney, because there are so many rock goddesses named Courtney – Courtney Love, Courtney Barnett… It's just an iconic 'badass woman in the rock scene' name, so I had to name my guitar Courtney. That's pretty much the only guitar I used for the whole thing, and we just played with different amp and pedal tones. I did also use… I can't remember the brand of the guitar, but my friend has a baritone that I used on "Wine".

This is a little secret that I probably shouldn't be telling anyone, but "Wine" and "Something About Being Sixteen" have pretty much the same chord progression – so to sort of separate them from being the exact same song, I used a baritone on "Wine", which gives it more of a middle-ground tone. It was a very hard guitar to play; it feels like strumming a bass.

What is it about the Tele that just makes your heart skip a beat?

A lot of the artists I look up to have used Teles, and I think it's got that really beautiful punky sound. Even without pedals, if you just plug it clean into an amp, it has this almost crunchy sound, and it's so effortlessly tough… But like, in a soft way. It's got such a nice clean tone, but it has an edge to it as well.

What is your philosophy behind using the guitar as a way to set a mood or tell a story?

Our producer is amazing because he didn't bring in all these fancy instruments and be like, "Play this because it sounds good." He just let us use what we had, and I think that in itself is what makes the recordings feel so good. I think you get such a homey vibe from them, because we're both just using our own instruments.

This is the guitar I play live, it's the guitar I play in my bedroom, it's the guitar I play when I go to my friend's house to have a jam, it's the guitar I play in practises… It's the guitar I use *everywhere*, and it's almost like a part of me; it's like an extra limb that I just have to carry around in a case. I always see bands smash guitars onstage and I'm like… Maybe I could buy a cheap one to smash one day, but I would never do that to my Tele – she's my baby! I just know my way around it as well – I feel like even if I picked up another Tele of the same model, it wouldn't feel 100 percent exactly the same.

ONE OF THE GREATS

STACKED WALL TO WALL WITH ALL-OUT BANGERS, AND CULLED FROM A MONSTROUS 100+ DEMOS, IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE **WATERPARKS** WERE BEING COMPLETELY TONGUE-IN-CHEEK WHEN THEY NAMED THEIR NEW ALBUM *GREATEST HITS*. FRONTMAN **AWSTEN KNIGHT** GIVES US THE LOWDOWN ON THIS EPIC COMPILATION OF INSTANT CLASSICS.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **JAWN ROCHA**.

After a century-plus of music's evolution, the concept of 'originality' has started to feel obsolete. If a sound exists, or has the potential to, trust that some agile producer has already found a way to make it bop in 4/4. In the 21st century, innovation is less about what you can invent than what you can do with the elements at your disposal. In recent years, we've seen death metal with horn sections, electronic ska, even classic rock written by artificial intelligence. Sometimes I wonder how John Lennon would've responded to dubstep.

The point is: genuinely anything is possible. And that's the core ethos on which Texan pop-punk outfit Waterparks is built. Eschewing the typical monochrome garb and reliance on themes of angst and anxiety, the trio embrace eccentricity with exhilarating aplomb – both in visual and sonic aesthetics. There are hallmarks each Waterparks album must adhere to – plenty of sass, swagger and singalong-suitable hooks – but the filters through which they'll spin those are powerfully polychromatic; trap beats, guitar solos, ballad-esque piano runs, breakdowns, bass drops – so long as it suits the tune, they'll find a place for it.

But of course, like any good band in its halcyon days will, Waterparks fight to make each new album more daring and exciting than its predecessor. In the case of LP4, *Greatest Hits*, that meant going all out with a 17-track behemoth dipping into everything from downtempo house to roaring '90s-flavoured alt-rock. As frontman Awsten Knight explains, inspiration for *Greatest Hits* came in some rather unusual forms; and at the end of the day, the guitar always reigns supreme – even if it's used in ways that would make Hendrix roll in his grave.

How did you want this record to really take Waterparks to the next level, or build upon what you'd established creatively on the first three LPs?

Honestly? The writing never stops. I mean, I do so much of it right here [at home] – half the album was recorded right here where I'm sitting. But I knew that with whatever came [after *Fandom*], I wanted it to be, like, *Fandom* but further, and in all different directions. Any directions the songs on *Fandom* started going, I wanted to make it sound more grand and expensive, and just massive… Which is funny considering half of it was made in my f***ing apartment.

But like… I don't know. That's the thing – it's hard to go into a release being like, "This is what we're going to do." Because if I'm thinking about a song being for an album, it puts too much pressure on me. If I'm thinking about it like that, I'm like, "It has to be so f***ing good – if it's not better than anything else we've done, I'm not going to let it exist."

I read somewhere that you went into the studio with over 100 song ideas.

That's the thing: whenever I'm stuck here and I'm able to record – and that's kind of all I can do at the moment – the ideas are just going to pour out of me! There were exactly 108 demos that we ended up with.

What drives that influx of creative energy?

There were times where it was a little bit tough, because I don't just want to do repetitive shit, y'know? So there were certain times when I'd be writing and I'd be like, "I kind of already said that, and in a better way. *Damn*." Whenever I hit those days, I would just do instrumentals. One thing I did was I started changing things around in here – I bought a bunch of plants one day and I was like, "Now I feel good!" And then I made, like, ten songs. Then I'd be like, "Ah shit, I can't think anymore," so I'd buy some coloured lights and be like, "Okay, let's do this!"

Zakk Cervini mixed and produced a whole bunch of stuff [on *Greatest Hits*], and right before we went on the last tour we got to do before lockdown, I brought of a bunch of reflective silver panelling into his studio. Then I went to this antique lamp store and got a bunch of different coloured lightbulbs, and I would kind of just put them in different areas of the studio, so it would be reflecting in different ways. I was like, "I'm only going to wear yellow…" It was dope. We made four songs in that session, and three of them are on the album.

So it really does come down to the atmosphere you're in at the time.

Yeah. And that was the hardest part of the process – because I'm obviously very affected by that, so when I'm stuck in the same f***ing place for a year, y'know, there are definitely days where I'm just like, "I don't f***in' know!"

I love that no matter how left-field your sound gets, the guitars do still play such a crucial role – even on a track like "Snow Globe" where you've got that really warm, rounded bassline driving the melody and that little bit with the wah pedal. What role do you see the guitar playing on a record like this?

With "Snow Globe", that one was done pretty much exactly a year ago, and it was my first time trying to just freestyle. I made the beat, I layered a bunch of pads and stuff on it and it was super moody. It was really late, I had the blue lights going, 'cause it was nighttime, and I was just going *"nah, nah, nah, nah"* over the instrumental. I put each of those vocal tracks on top of each other, right, and the next day I was walking around the building, just listening to all of them layered, and I was like, "Oh this is dope!"

That's straight-up how the outro happened, because one of those vocal layers was like [*hits crazy high note*], and another one was like [*bassy low note*], and I was just like, *"Ohhhhhhh!* That's how we're gonna end that shit!" But when I started adding guitars over it – like big, distorted guitars – I was like, "This feels *wrong*." Because the thing is, like, yeah, we're a band, but I just don't feel the pressure to be like, "Oh, but if we don't have guitars go *'BRRRRR!'* in every song, and if there's not crash symbols going *'CSH! CSH! CSH!'* in every song, it's not a real band song!"

With "Snow Globe", I was like, "Obviously there still has to be guitars" – and there *very much* is, it's just not in the typical pop-punk kind of way. I started with normal acoustic strums and panned them out, and then strummed at the back so it sounded kind of Western, then got the 12-string in there and distorted it, threw on a wah pedal… It's all about making the song feel as unique and exciting as possible.

There are so many sounds and tonal idiosyncrasies on this record – is it all programmed, or are you much of a slut for analogue gear?

Analogue is tricky for me – especially with this release, because I was stuck here in my apartment for a lot of the recording process. And there are effects on things that aren't guitars; we were throwing choruses and phasers and flangers on, like, vocals and drums and all this other shit. When there's something that's meant for a guitar and you put it on something else, there's just something about that that just makes it… It's kind of an attitude, y'know? It makes it feel rock-y – and I think subconsciously, people hear that and go, "Why does this still f***in' shred!?" Because it's mixed like a guitar!

PICTURE PERFECT

THE NEW EP FROM **MANNEQUIN PUSSY** SAVED THE TRIO FROM THE BRINK OF COLLAPSE AFTER AN ESPECIALLY ROUGH 2020 – SO IT'S FITTING THEY CALLED IT *PERFECT*.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA.** PHOTO BY **PHOBYMO**.

Hot on the heels of their breakthrough third album *Patience*, 2020 was poised to be the year Mannequin Pussy officially took over the world. It was a well-earned triumph for the Philly punks, following a decade of slugging it out in bars and basements around the US. But just as they were set to make their mark on the world stage, COVID-19 came and wreaked havoc on the music industry at large. Like virtually everyone else in the arts, Mannequin Pussy were forced to put their dreams on ice while the world around them crumbled.

In the eye of the storm, frontwoman Marisa 'Missy' Dabice wondered if the band would make it out alive. It certainly seemed more lucrative for them all to pack up and start over in more traditional professions, at least – especially since their longstanding guitarist Thanasi Paul had done just that at the start of the year. With no clear path ahead – and having spent most of the year apart – Missy booked a short block of studio time that would make or break the band.

Just to make sure they weren't wasting money – especially when it was tighter than ever – the band went in two pre-written songs from the *Patience* era. But just as luck (and the adamantine strength of their bond) would have it, the band wound up reconvening with a wealth of ideas. The double A-side quickly blossomed into a five-track EP of their sharpest and most impassioned material yet, with the seeds planted for an even more explosive fourth album.

As the band gear up for their second attempt at world domination, we caught up with Missy to learn more about how *Perfect* saved Mannequin Pussy, why it holds an especially special place in Missy's heart, and how it sets the stage for a bright future ahead.

After being apart for so long, were you all just exploding with ideas when you got back into a room together?

Kind of! Yeah, it was definitely the fastest we've ever written, for sure. We are a band that, historically, has really taken our time with songwriting. In the very beginning, it was like you'd start writing something, you'd be done with it in 15 minutes and you'd be like, "Alright, next song!" And then over the years, it just kind of became this obsessive thing where we would work on a song for a year, just trying out all the possible melodies and lyrics and arrangements. So it was nice to be in a spot where we weren't so precious with it, and we just allowed what came off the bat to be.

When you listen back on the record, do you feel like that impulsive energy seeps through?

I think so... Maybe a little bit. I kind of feel like this collection of songs almost sounds a little more polished – like, it sounds more polished than I *feel*.

Why is that?

I mean, I just feel so drained and mentally confused, and trying to understand what the future looks like – not just for myself, but for everyone around me as well, and for people all over the world. This is the weirdest time, I think, in recent human history – so y'know, going into a studio and being able to craft these songs, it felt like kind of I was able to take control over something again.

And in other ways, it's kind of bittersweet to listen back to these songs, because around the time we were recording them, our longterm guitarist [Thanasi Paul] decided that he didn't want to do the band stuff anymore. He wants to, y'know, get married and have babies and stuff. So there were big, big changes all around last year – I was happy that we got to make some things together before those changes really took hold.

Did the pandemic give you a new, or amplified sense of appreciation for the band?

No [*laughs*]. I think if anything, I felt that it's much harder. I definitely wasn't surprised when Thanasi was like, "I'm ready to do something new." Because I think the moment that you take away touring – the moment you take away this comfortable place that we've been in all these years – it gives everyone a lot of space to sit around and think, "Am I doing exactly what I want with my life? Am I living the way I want to be living?"

I had this theory early on last year, I was like, "I think a lot of people are going to quit bands. I think a lot of people are going to have these really heavy conversations with themselves." And I personally am coming away from it like, "Yes, I want to continue to make music for the rest of my life, and my channel emotions in that way."

So did this EP come out of necessity, then, to keep your creative output afloat?

Yeah, I think [Colin 'Bear' Regisford, bass], Kaleen [Reading, drums] and I definitely became huge, strong unit last year – especially in the ways we talked to each other about what we were going through, and how we were feeling creatively. We all knew it was a risk, booking studio time and not having any songs. Because worst case scenario, you go in there and feel even worse than you did before you went in, because you weren't able to pull something out of that time.

But it did feel like a lifeline in a lot of ways, to suddenly have something to pour ourselves into and to understand our feelings, and be able to write words and assign art to them. I don't know, it just made sense. I spent a lot of time last year asking myself, "What's the point of art and music, and doing these things?" But then when I reflect on how much of my time I've spent coping through other people's creativity – whether it was through films or TV shows or video games, or books or comics or music – I was like, "Yeah, this is what makes me feel like I'm connected to reality."

Do you see the *Perfect* EP as a bridge between *Patience* and what will eventually become the fourth album?

Definitely. I could've totally seen all the songs that we made for *Perfect* being on *Patience*, had they existed then. They all kind of feel like an extension of that universe and those feelings – but starting to head somewhere new for us, too. It's very exciting to think that there's more things for us to create, and more sounds we can discover.

Do you see the next record taking a bit of a stylistic leap?

I hope so! I mean, that's something I reflected on a lot last year – I'm honestly starting to feel like a neanderthal in the way I approach music. I know you're definitely not supposed to say this – I certainly don't know if my label would like me saying this when we're trying to promote a record – but like, it feels f***ing archaic to be in a rock band sometimes! It's a very primitive way of making music with people – y'know, you have your guitars and your bass and your drums – and something I asked myself so many times was, "Why?" Like, why are we continuing to make things in this very particular way, when I think we're all kind of yearning to discover a new path?

Is it exciting to think about how you'll explore those new paths?

Oh, yeah! I've been thinking a lot about what I would imagine rock music of the future sounding like.

What *would* it sound like?

I don't want to think it would still be exactly what we created in 2020, where people are like, "Oh, '90s, great!" What would the most popular rock band on the planet sound like in 2045? It would probably still be the Foo Fighters [*laughs*].

SNACK ATTACK!

ON THEIR LOUD AND LIVELY THIRD ALBUM – THE APTLY TITLED *NOW WE'RE COOKIN'* – THE BONAFIDE ROCK DOGS IN **POLISH CLUB** TAKE A BIG OL' BITE OF THE POP PIE.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA.** PHOTO BY **DEREK BOGART.**

It was in 2016 that *Australian Guitar* first highlighted Polish Club, then riding the high of their debut EP and opening shows to crowds of around 100. They swung with a thick, groove-ridden rock 'n' roll swagger lionising the greats of the '40s and '50s – albeit with a gruff, caffeinated edge of Australian pub-punk aplomb. When they rang the next year in with their debut album, *Alright Already*, they cracked the mainstream with little more than David Novak's roaring baritone howls and passionate semi-hollow strumming, and the wall-rattling fills of drummer John-Henry Pajak.

2019's *Iguana* retained the duo's rock-centric bite with a slick dose of disco-flavoured sparkle and buoyant pop spirit, introducing a Polish Club less restricted by genre, but which still fit ardently in its wheelhouse of guitars, drums and pseudo-crooners. For better or worse, there was a method to Polish Club's madness... Until now.

If *Iguana* was one step up from the sonic palate of *Alright Already*, then its sequel – the bold and ballsy, genre-bending *Now We're Cookin'* – is approximately three kilometres and a half-eaten cheeseburger down the line. No two tracks on the half-hour helping sound the same, from the gauzy and glittery "Stop For A Minute" to the jangly "Just Talking", right to the summer-lovin' "Getaway" and heart-wrenching "No Heaven". As Novak tells us today, Polish Club have truly thrown caution to the wind with LP3 – there are no rules, no boundaries, and plenty of snacks.

With the stylistic jump you've taken on *Now We're Cookin'*, how did your approach to the guitar change?

At the end of the day, all of them were still written with just the guitar and drums. And I think because we focus on melody first and foremost, and I don't start singing until John's playing the beat, it's a lot easier to move around those elements. The guitar is always just supporting the melody when we write a song – there's always chords that are going to fit underneath, it never really starts with a lead guitar part.

I think we're focussed on hooks and melodies so much to the point where it almost needs more than just guitar to play live, to get away with it. Like, I wouldn't necessarily think that we could get away with "Stop For A Minute" as a two-piece. So in a sense, we've kind of moved beyond that OG Polish Club setup. Plus, working with Scott Horscroft, the co-producer – he would just automatically add all of this stuff, be it drum machines or synths or screams... There's a couple of little Phil Spector moments where it's just a wall of sound – there's f***ing e-bows and all this crazy shit – and the guitar has very much just become one of those things, as opposed to the old way where it was like, "It's a guitar and drum song, and we're filling in the gaps." It's like, no, the guitar is part of the gaps now. But that being said, any song we write still has to work with just bass, guitar and drums.

Well I know you guys have started playing shows as a four-piece – do you feel more confident being able to stack more layers into the tracks because they'll be fleshed out live with those extra members?

Yes and no – I mean, I don't know that we would be able to tour as a four-piece forever, or for a massive album tour. So we do have to adjust and make sure that I can just play chords, or we could just have bass and I can still get by. I guess that's why there's not so many lead guitar parts – I mean there never *really* was, and I think that's because we're always thinking in the back of our minds, "Does this stand up live?" And I think the simplicity of these songs means that, yeah, they kind of always will – because I can just play chords. And I don't mean that to denigrate the guitar or to say that it's not important – but those parts are purposefully kind of malleable, y'know? They're always just propping up the melody and filling in those gaps.

It's always been like that though, hasn't it? In the case of *Alright Already*, those were all very driving, guitar-heavy tracks – but those guitar parts are certainly part of a much larger musical puzzle.

They are, but I think with those first two albums, it was very much a genre-focussed stylistic choice in what you would hear from the guitars. The first album was full of those really warm semi-hollow guitar parts throughout, and it was very much a concept in genre – not necessarily on purpose, either; I think just because that's what we were most comfortable doing. That was our safe zone, and it was easy for us to write that stuff.

And then the second album got a bit more – for me, relatively – experimental with things like riffs, and doing more with a bigger pedalboard. And I feel like that was another distinct approach to the guitar. But for this one, we really made a choice to not be like, "Okay, well it's *this* kind of genre" – especially with guitars.

There were 13 guitars in the studio when we went to track, and I used every single one. There was a Strat, a Tele, a Duesenberg Starplayer, a Jag, a f***ing Gretsch Duo Jet or whatever it's called – and I used every single one, but for very specific purposes. And it didn't feel like such a big deal to be switching between those things, because they were all just in support of a greater endgame – which was just, "Let's make this song as catchy as possible."

I don't care what we have to put in, because nobody's going to go, "This is a f***ing mess!" I feel like if I start singing and John starts playing the drums, people will be like, "Oh yeah, it sounds like *that f***ing band*." It's not like if Albert Hammond Jr. came onstage without a Strat. I haven't established myself as a guitarist that... Well, I haven't established myself as a guitarist at all, in my opinion, but like... It's to support the band – the sound. I don't find it particularly iconic or anything.

That's a far cry from what you'd have said in 2016 when it came to the Epiphone Sheraton.

Totally, yeah, I was ready to die on that hill playing my Sheraton forever. I couldn't even afford the Gibson version [*laughs*]. But y'know, there's only so much you can do with it – especially in terms of songwriting.

I found that when you're in the studio, sometimes it's nice to have someone else like Scott, who's like, "Why don't you pick up that Strat and just strum those chords two octaves higher than you normally would." Usually I would be like, "No, I f***ing hate Strats, I don't want to do that." Like, I am a rhythm guitarist, why would I be doing an overdub on a Strat? But again, that's besides the point because you're just filling that gap – it's a different tone that I'm not precious about anymore.

There's an e-bow on four of the songs, I think – at least four – and I was just like, "Ugh, an *e-bow!?*" In my mind, I'm thinking back to my high school band where our guitarist would just do all this wanky shit with an e-bow, and I'm like, "That's so gross, we're not a nu-metal band!" And then Scott's like, "What the f*** are you taking about? David Bowie uses an e-bow on 'Heroes'." And I'd just be like, "Oh shit, really?" It was honestly really refreshing to be like, "Let's just try it" – more often than not, you'll find a place for it.

A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

TWO YEARS AGO, **TIM ROGERS** WOULD'VE SWORN THERE WOULD NEVER BE ANOTHER **YOU AM I** RECORD. BUT HERE WE ARE, AT THE TAIL END OF A PANDEMIC, AND ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S QUINTESSENTIAL ROCK BANDS ARE RISING FROM THE ASHES WITH SOME OF THEIR STRONGEST WORK TO DATE.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **KANE HIBBERD**.

With three consecutive #1 albums, a trophy case of accolades and more sold-out shows than you could wave a mic stand at, You Am I had one hell of a run in the '90s. But as the years went by and their stronghold on the Aussie alt-rock circuit waned, so too did frontman Tim Rogers' adoration for it. By 2018, touring had become a chore, and Rogers seemed ready to pack up his pedalboard for good. He turned his songwriting efforts to folk tunes. He got a job at a bar. The dream, as it were, was over.

It was on a 2019 trip to the New South Wales south coast, where You Am I spent their seminal years practising, that Rogers first penned "The Waterboy". There was no grand plan for the track, nor was his jaunt up north an attempt to rekindle his rock 'n' roll spirit – he was staying in a cheap motel, fishing every morning and pouring his thoughts out into folk songs as nothing more than a mental exercise. But after a much needed pep talk from longtime friend and fellow rock dog Tex Perkins – who Rogers noted in a press release "is wonderful about cutting through my over-dramatic stuff" – the spark began to flicker once more.

Ironically, it was the COVID-19 lockdown in which live music was shut down that Rogers realised he missed being in a rock band. He sent "The Waterboy" to guitarist Davey Lane, and just like that, You Am I were back in action. Rogers' lowkey folk tunes quickly grew legs as full-fat rock jams, and by the end of the year, the band – albeit split in two between Melbourne and Sydney – had their comeback record ready to go. Introspective, cathartic and aristocratic, *The Live Of Others* takes You Am I back to their throne as the rightful kings of Australian alt-rock.

And before you ask, yes, You Am I do have a weighty slate of touring on the horizon. In the meantime, let's check in with Rogers to learn more about how LP #11 came to be.

I know that before this record started coming to life, you were in a bit of a creative slump. How did you reckon with that period of uncertainty towards the band's future?

I wasn't in a creative slump, I just thought that I wasn't enjoying being in a band. I was miserable touring – either by myself or with a band – and I didn't want to be around the guys with that attitude, because I was bringing everyone down. So I kind of extricated myself from the band and just went and worked, had a few different jobs here and there, and then after a few months I thought, "Okay, I see what was wrong with me," and worked quite hard to get that fixed so that if we do get to tour again, I'll be a better bandmate for my friends. But creatively, I was always writing – it was just that I wasn't being a good friend or bandmate. I was a good drinking mate, but not a good bandmate.

At what point did it become clear to you that a new You Am I record was starting to take shape?

Davey and I sent some demo-ish things to Rusty [Hopkinson, drums] and said, "What do you think of these?" He went into the studio for a day and put together some ideas, and when he sent them to us the next day, Davey and I got together and just started laughing. We were like, "This is the absolute right thing to do." I don't dictate the way a song is going to be – for other projects, maybe, but not with You Am I. I'm kind of the least musically adept member of the band – so when Rusty sent back his ideas and Davey and I heard him playing, we were just over the moon.

It was winter in Melbourne and things were a little bit challenging, but Davey and I live quite close together, so we just went out on the street and shouted at each other, "Yep, we're going to do this!" And similarly when Andy [Kent, bass] went into the studio and sent us his ideas, we thought, "Yep, this is it." So I threw out all the folk rubbish I was writing, and we were together just making songs – Davey and I in the studio together, and Rusty and Andy in a studio up in Sydney.

What was that creative dynamic like, having the band split in two parties?

For this record, it actually helped. I've been joking that when we get into a studio together, we say, "Let's be industrious!" But then we have one good day, then we just get *f***ing hammered*, and then four days later everyone's a bit cranky. It just felt very purposeful – we knew that the world wasn't waiting for a new You Am I record, but when we heard what we could do with those songs, and how we collectively felt about them... I always feel very emotional about the songs, and very attached, but after 30 years of writing I've kind of tried to tone that down; I was just secretly hoping that the guys liked them as much as I love them. And they did, which I can tell by the way that they played.

I absolutely love the songs Davey wrote for the record, because we had shared that experience together over the last year. We've been together for 30 years, but when you don't see each other for a year and you're used to being in each other's pockets all the time, it's such a weird experience. So for a record where we weren't in the same room, it's surprisingly emotional – especially when we play these songs live.

Did that lead to these songs coming together in a different way than they might have in a more traditional album-making process?

Yeah, possibly. We've never had the luxury of saying, "Oh, let's just go into the studio and see what happens!" I'll write what I can – chords and melodies and lyrics – and send them to the guys to point a bit ahead. We didn't do that early on, but we have for the past 25 years or so because I don't think any of us could stand to spend a month kicking around the same idea. Andy could probably do that – Davey maybe – but Rusty and I are very impatient.

We couldn't spend weeks in a studio just sitting around and going, "Oh, let's do lunch." I'd rather go to the pub or sit out in the park with a slab of beer and know what we're doing then and there, so that we could go into the studio and give ourselves the least amount of time possible. Even though we had a little bit of time in Davey's own studio, I didn't want to spend hours in there just deliberating over things. So we made all the big decisions before we even went into the studios separately.

What guitars were you noodling around on for this one?

I got given a Les Paul copy – an Italian Greco – by some strangers in a country town; they were very generous, they liked what I did and gave me this guitar, which was amazing. I'd never played Les Pauls before, but I had that Greco and a Gretsch Duo Jet that I bought a bunch of years ago. Davey's got a couple guitars at his home – I tend to go for the oddities, and Davey goes for the good-sounding ones. Because I live in a tiny apartment, all the songs are written on an acoustic guitar – a Guild Jumbo that I got about 20 years ago – and for songs with the band, I just hit it harder.

What was that Greco like?

I think I'm someone who doesn't want to spend a lot of time trying to find the right guitar sound – if I find a guitar that I really like, I'll try to write songs to suit it. There's something really special about that moment when you get a guitar in your hands, and you want to write songs just to hear that sound. And that Les Paul is very different from the Piers Crocker Rickenbackers I normally play. I did record with the Crockers as well – it's pretty obvious because those Crockers have a very distinct jangly sound, and the Les Paul is a lot more of a thuggish-sounding thing.

BACK IN BLUE

FOLLOWING A WELL-EARNED RISE TO STARDOM, UK ALT-ROCKERS **WOLF ALICE** LEAP TO EVEN GRANDER HEIGHTS WITH THEIR DREAMY AND DEEP NEW ALBUM, *BLUE WEEKEND*. SINGER-STRUMMER **ELLIE ROWSELL** AND LEAD AXEMAN **JOFF ODDIE** LEAD US DOWN THE RABBITHOLE.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **JORDAN HEMINGWAY**.

The 2010s paved the way for some of the rock world's biggest and best acts to thrive, with the advent of streaming services, a resurgence in the popularity of festivals, and landmark developments in artist-to-fan connections all at the forefront of a new golden age for the alternative scene. Wolf Alice took full advantage of music's mid-decade cultural shift, and with their 2015 full-length debut, *My Love Is Cool*, established themselves as one of the bands Gen Z would be foolish to ignore. 2017's *Visions Of A Life* only amped up the hype, scoring widespread critical acclaim, a Silver certification in their native UK, and the 2018 Mercury Prize.

In less than a decade, Wolf Alice soared from nonchalant acoustic-folk duo to one of the most influential names in modern music. So when it came time to round out their trilogy of heavy-hitting indie-rock epics, the quartet buckled under the weight of burnout. After a short hiatus, they tucked away in the cozy hills of Somerset, south-west England, where they embraced life away from the spotlight and grew their personal friendships, jamming out in a converted church without any pressure to meet certain expectations or deadlines.

So brings us to Wolf Alice's transcendent third album, *Blue Weekend*: an evocative exploration of the self driven by bold, authoritative instrumentals and the most open-hearted songwriting frontwoman Ellie Rowsell has committed to record. It's an album well worth the four-year wait – and according to Rowsell and guitarist Joff Oddie, that extra time was crucial in allowing the record's unapologetic fierceness to ferment.

What made you guys want to step back and take a little more time with this one?

Joff: I don't think there was a big master plan with it, really. We didn't really have a gap between the first and second records, so when it came to the end of the touring cycle for [*Visions Of A Life*], we were just beat. We needed to take a little respite – which wasn't even that long, it was only about three months before we started work on [*Blue Weekend*]. But this one definitely took a lot longer to grapple with – the second record came very quickly and very easily, so it almost felt like we were having the 'difficult second record' on the third one.

Why was that?

Joff: I think it just took longer – not that it was painful or particularly horrible in any parts. It just took us a lot longer to feel like we were there, I think. And the recording took a lot longer than we thought it would have.

Was that due to you wanting to explore some new things, or approach the creative process differently in any way?

Ellie: I think we were really lucky, because our label and management really helped to reinforce the message that, like, this was a really important record. We needed to get to a place where we felt good about it and we were happy with it, and not worry about how long that would take. They've always said that to us, but it really mattered with this album. We had no other distractions, and we just worked on it until we felt like it was finished. But I mean, some people take years and years to make records, so I don't think it was a *crazy* long time.

Do you think that led to a better record at the end of the day?

Ellie: I don't think time always leads to a better record, but yeah, maybe it did. We have always worked to a timeline before, and I think that served us well in the past, but it was definitely nice to be able to go, "That sounds good, but should we try it again in a different way?" Normally we'd just be like, "Oh that sounds good, let's move on." And I found that process was quite hard – it's hard to know when to stop, and it's hard to work with no other distractions – but I do think the record benefited from it.

I love a lot of the contrasting vibes on this record – on "Delicious Things" and "The Last Man On Earth", there's this proggy, psychedelic, almost Floydian vibe, but then "Play The Greatest Hits" is all big, fat, '90s grunge and punk. I know it's such a cliche question, but what were you inspired by for this record?

Ellie: I think we always struggle with that question, because we wrote and rehearsed and recorded this album over such a long span of time. It's hard to pinpoint exactly what our inspirations were, musically. They were all kind of subconscious, I think – there weren't any obvious things that we referenced in the studio.

Joff: I think the thing we're always chasing in the studio, as a reference point, is a feeling. And I think that can be quite hard to explain – especially to a producer, because it takes some time to build that relationship up and be able to talk in that way, and kind of *get* each other. But we very much have that between the four of us [in the band], and have done for a long time now.

It's always been about chasing emotions, and we know when we've accomplished that. It's kind of hard to know sometimes if it feels wrong, but when it really hits the mark, we're all like, "Oh yeah! That's what we were after with this!" You just feel a certain way. It can be very confusing in the studio, but it's crucial to the process.

Musically speaking, Wolf Alice has always had that very atmospheric and crystalline slant, but this album ups the ante a little bit. Was that dream-pop vibe something you were keen to dip into a little deeper on LP3?

Ellie: I don't know if 'dream-pop' is the term I would use, but I definitely think we like things to feel cinematic and atmospheric. Someone described this album to me as 'widescreen' the other day, and unless I completely misunderstood them, I was like, "Yeah, totally!" I kind of like that. But I do like both of those words – 'dream' and 'pop' – so maybe.

So how did that play into the way you guys approached the guitars on this album? Did you see an opportunity to explore any new techniques or playing styles?

Joff: It's interesting... Obviously my job as the guitar player is going, "Okay, what can guitars do to benefit this song, and to benefit the emotional content in it?" And it feels like a really nice place to be at the moment, because going into this record, it felt like we had a bunch of tricks we'd learnt from the first two records.

We knew worked, and what we were happy and comfortable with – things like making ambient tones and soundscape-y things, different techniques with different pedals and amps and stuff... Even basic things like layering fuzzes across the stereo field. So there was a confidence we had going into it, which kind of allowed me to get a little bit funky with acoustic instruments.

There are quite a few instances on [*Blue Weekend*] where we've got lots of layered up, kind of odd acoustic instruments, like tenor resonators and banjos, acoustically mic'd up electric guitars, classical guitars and 12-strings. Also, something that Markus Dravs [producer] instilled in us was that it doesn't really matter where a good guitar sound comes from; if it's a good guitar sound, then it's a good guitar sound.

For example, I don't know if I'm bursting any bubbles here, but the guitar solo in "Last Man On Earth" is just DI'd straight into a really standard interface – it's the most basic Logic amp and pedal presets. There's a bunch of songs that use that kind of stuff – and it's cool. There's a bunch of songs that have silly multi-amp and multi-pedal setups that are a lot more elaborate, but it doesn't always have to be that way.

SPACE JAM

NEVER ONES TO REST ON THEIR LAURELS, THE LEGENDARY **DINOSAUR JR.** SHAKE THINGS UP WITH METEORIC MIGHT ON THEIR FIRST ALBUM IN FIVE YEARS: THE **THIN LIZZY**-INSPIRED, **KURT VILE**-FLOURISHED *SWEEP IT INTO SPACE.*

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **CARA TOTMAN**.

For any band 12 albums deep, there's a level of normality to be expected – you're not hovering over the play button thinking, "Okay, *this* is gonna be the one that really makes a stink!" This much is especially true for any band packing out theatres and shifting thousands of discs on the regular; if they stuck gold on a certain sound or formula, you can bet a hot dollar they'll be riding it right to the grave.

Every so often, of course, there'll be one band eager to buck the trend. They may not *completely* shed their stylistic skin, but they'll stir the pot just enough to keep longstanding fans hooked in and pique the interests of potential newcomers. In the case of genre-defining '90s icons Dinosaur Jr, that meant dosing up their epochal alt-rock palate with duelling lead guitars inspired by Thin Lizzy, some fresh perspective from new-age indie stalwart Kurt Vile, and a touch of empiricism brought on by J Mascis' need to finish album #12 in isolation.

The end result is *Sweep It Into Space*: a defiantly melodic, emphatically energised beast of twisting grooves, pummelling riffs and hearty, heavy-hitting hooks. *Australian Guitar* caught up with Mascis to learn more about how Dinosaur Jr. bellied up their latest declaration of alternative dominance.

How does Sweep It Into Space add to the last 37 years of Dinosaur Jr's creative output?

I don't know... It's just another album, y'know? We just wanted another set of songs to tour on. I guess having Kurt Vile around lightened the mood a little bit around the studio. Y'know, we're just always trying to make the best record we can make at any given time.

What was the musical chemistry like between yourselves and Kurt?

I think it made Lou [Barlow, bass] and Murph [drums] feel a little more at ease, y'know, to keep slogging along, trying to learn the songs. He just made the mood a little bit lighter than usual.

Did you guys throw many ideas back and forth?

Nah. He would just listen to us play, and if he heard something he wanted to sing or play on his guitar, he'd try it – and then if I liked it I'd leave it in, and if not I'd delete it. But I liked a lot of the stuff he came up with.

My understanding is that when the pandemic hit, you were in the tail end of the recording, but you still had a little bit left to go, so you ended up doing everything yourself. What can you tell us about that last chunk of the process?

Yeah, it was strange. Y'know, I'm not great at engineering, so I had to learn few things. And I had to play some keyboards, which was a little hard. I think Kurt was going to come back at some stage, too, so who knows if he would've added some more stuff. I didn't mix it at home, but that wasn't too bad because we used the same guy that mixed the last few records [John Agnello] so it wasn't too hard of a transition. But yeah, it was just strange more than anything.

I was watching the Fender Play interview where you stressed the importance of always learning new things to do with the guitar, no matter how long you've been at it. How did that apply to your approach to the guitar on this record?

Y'know, whatever I'd learned over the last few years, I tried to apply to this record. There were a different tunings... I like to play a lot of different guitars, because they always have a unique sound. Y'know, maybe most people can't hear any difference, but I feel that different guitars inspire me to play different things and in different ways.

What were some of those new tunings you wanted to explore?

The first song ["I Ain't"] has got a G tuning, like the Stones used a lot. I did have another song on the last album in a G tuning, and thought, "Oh, here's another song I can play on the same guitar during a show." I don't go too crazy with tunings, but it definitely makes you play differently, not knowing exactly where to put your fingers.

I read that as far as the guitar sound on this record goes, you were inspired a lot by Thin Lizzy and their duelling twin-lead sound. What was it like for you to tap into a little bit of that?

Y'know, that's another thing – it's probably not that evident, but that's just what I was into at that moment, so I'd slip a few little things in. But I don't know if you'd really notice anything if you didn't already know about it. There's a little bit of harmony guitar in "I Ran Away", but it's really nothing like what Thin Lizzy sounds like. But y'know, every album I'm usually into some different thing that I'm into more than other things.

What was your guitarsenal like for this record?

Well speaking of Thin Lizzy, I got a '72 Les Paul Deluxe, and I used that on the rhythm part for ["I Ain't"]. I had this St. Vincent guitar that Ernie Ball gave me, too, and I found that really useful. A lot of the time, I'll play songs with a capo on the ninth fret, and a lot of my old guitars can't really stay in tune with a capo that far up on the fretboard. But the Ernie Ball guitar is somehow set up so that it will, so I'd use that guitar for the parts where I needed that advantage.

What is it about that '72 Les Paul Deluxe that makes it such a gem?

I'd never really thought about them really until I was watching those Thin Lizzy videos, and I heard that when Scott Gorham came to England and joined the band, he had such a shitty guitar that they had to go out and buy him a new one. He and Brian Robertson bought these brand new Les Paul Deluxes, and you can see them in a lot of the early videos – I know they played it on *Jailbreak*. And yeah, it's not a guitar you see that many people play these days. It was around a lot when I was a kid, though. The mini humbuckers have a really unique sound that I like a lot.

Do you use many of your signature Jazzmasters in the studio?

I don't all that much, but Lou has been playing them for his songs lately. I don't tend to use Jazzmasters much in the recording – I guess it's more like my live guitar now.

Why do you prefer to play those live, but others in the studio?

I tend to like to play this '58 Tele for leads, ever since I got it right before we did *Where You Been* in the '90s – that's been my favourite guitar to play leads on for the longest time. And I usually like to play a Les Paul Junior for rhythm. That's kind of my basic sound for recording, and then other guitars come and go. But the Jazzmaster... I don't know. I mean, I learned how to play on it, so that's what I tend to play live because I'm used to it.

Has the idea of a signature Tele ever come up?

Yeah, they actually copied my Tele for a new model that's supposed to come out in August. *[Editor's note: unfortunately we can't share any more details about this just yet. Keep your eyes peeled, though!]*

A NEW KIND OF FEELING

FOR A HOT MINUTE, IT SEEMED AS THOUGH *FIRST TIME REALLY FEELING* – THE LONG-AWAITED NEW ALBUM FROM MELBOURNE FOLK-ROCKER **LIZ STRINGER** – WOULD NEVER MAKE IT TO SHELVES. BUT WE'RE GLAD IT DID: THE SOUL-BEARING OPUS IS SOME OF HER STRONGEST, AND UNDOUBTEDLY MOST POIGNANT, WORK TO DATE.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **KRISTOFFER PAULSEN**.

It's been a storied 15 years for Melbourne-native folk goddess Liz Stringer, with a string of critically cherished studio and live albums, a devoted cult following on local shores (though as *NME's* David James Young attests, “she deserves her own megachurch”) and a phenomenal collaborative project with fellow indie-rockers Mia Dyson and Jen Cloher (nonchalantly dubbed Dyson Stringer Cloher). But despite already establishing a remarkable legacy, it's on Stringer's newest effort, *First Time Really Feeling* – her first solo full-length in half a decade – that she truly opens herself up to the world. In more ways than one, you could call it the debut album from Liz Stringer 2.

On a sonic wavelength, *First Time Really Feeling* is Stringer's sharpest, crispiest and most instantly earwormish effort – the soundscapes are cool and colourful and cheery – though thematically, it's a clear-cut gut-punch of raw, lucid emotion. Stringer always tends to wear her heart on her sleeve, but in the past there's always been a few degrees of separation – a lens of metaphor or narrative frame through which she filters her ruminations; but here, her thoughts are completely bare. And it makes sense especially given the album's origin: when she was writing it, Stringer was going through some of the biggest and most transformative personal changes she ever had. More confident than ever to embrace her mental turbulence through art, *First Time Really Feeling* is apt title.

As the world settles in with the record, Stringer caught up with *Australian Guitar* to chat about how *First Time Really Feeling* came to life.

Why did you decide to keep this record on the shelf for a while?

Well, when I made it, I didn't have management, I didn't have a team at all, I had just moved to Canada, and I was feeling pretty burnt out; I wasn't sure whether I wanted to – or even *could* – keep working as a musician. I was very tired, and lot of personal things had come to a head… I just knew I wasn't in the right headspace to put a record out. I really wanted to give this album the support it deserved, going into the world, and if I couldn't do that, then there wasn't any point in putting it out – and that included having really sound mental health.

I started working with my management at the start of 2020, and we were like, “Let's put a plan together, and let's take our time – we don't have to rush to get it out.” So it was always going to be now – but as it turns out, it was good timing anyway, just as far as touring was concerned.

And y'know, I just feel better – when I made the album, I'd just turned 38, and I was at that point I think a lot of people get to where they just think, “What am I doing?” It's sort of like the end of your youth, so to speak, and the start of this great new phase – but it hasn't started being all that great yet. I just had to really knuckle down and face some stuff before I was comfortable with moving forward as a musician.

How did you want this record to encapsulate the experiences you'd had leading up to it?

I didn't used to write much from my own perspective. I'm quite a prolific writer, but I've always been really interested in people, and the minutiae of life, common experience and all that sort of stuff, so I've written a lot from other perspectives – partly because I think I just didn't have a very good access to my own inner world, y'know?

I got sober in 2016, and that was a big, big change for me. It precipitated an enormous period of self-development – and part of that was becoming really connected with myself, so I started writing really personally. I didn't set out to, but I was suddenly able to metabolise all this stuff that I hadn't utilised until then. It definitely hadn't come naturally to do in the past. Some of these songs take place in those last couple of years of drinking, where things were really not good. I don't think I necessarily set out to capture that time, but I think inevitably you do that if you're writing very personally, because whatever's happening in your life is being captured naturally.

So being able to step back and look at the record as it exists now, do you feel like it hits a little harder, or feels a little more intimate than some of your earlier material?

Oh, yeah – like, in a big way. Some of the songs were quite new when I was going into the studio – I was writing right up until I was in the vocal booth – but some of them I'd been playing for a while, and the songs that I had played over those two or three years, longtime supporters of mine were really struck by the difference. Again, it's just about having that access – and not only a connection with myself, but a connection with other people. I think I'm the type of artist that has always relied on that connection with people, but it's just so much cleaner now, and these songs are so much more direct.

I think that their impact is at least more immediate, y'know? And that's been amazing, to see the change in myself reflected in the reaction to my work – that's been really moving on a lot of levels, and very affirming. I've always known this objectively, as a writer and as a lover of art, but y'know, you connect with things that are real – that ride along the straight line between me as an artist and you as a consumer of art.

Being in the headspace you were when you wrote a lot of these songs, did you feel more confident about take some creative risks?

It's kind of hard to remember exactly how I felt at the time, but I can remember thinking, “I don't really care if this is the last thing that I do.” I didn't have any design for the outcome, which was very different to other records I've made. So there's probably a bit of a liberation in there. I remember that with some of the stuff, when I wrote it, I was like, “Ah, this is too…” I mean, none of it is *shocking*, but y'know, sometimes it involves people I know, and I'd never had any second guessing about putting material out before. It's been a really interesting process because of that – because of the personal nature of it all.

What guitars did you have in the studio for this record?

I have a hollowbody Ibanez – a Japanese 335 copy, basically – and that was the only guitar of mine that I had over there [in Canada]. And it just sounded beautiful. On some of the slower, sort of richer, more ballad-y songs, I'm playing that. And then there's a guy in Toronto who's friends with Chris Stringer, who produced this album, who makes beautiful custom Teles – his name is Alastair Miller – and Chris has an amazing guitar that Alastair made for him. So we used that a lot, we used a Firebird for a couple of things… I seem to remember there being a Flying V in there at some point… But that Tele – I really love Teles, but some of them can lack a bit of punch. They can be quite toppy and thin – which is sometimes a great sound – but the one Alastair made had this really beautiful thick, comfortable neck, and heaps of guts. And so it was able to cut through, but also create some really beautiful mids that just gave the songs a bit more power.

ALL FUNKED UP

EVEN AFTER 20 YEARS AT THE FOREFRONT OF AUSTRALIA'S FUNK AND SOUL SCENE, **THE BAMBOOS** ARE STILL FINDING NEW WAYS TO ENERGISE AND AMPLIFY THEIR SOUND. AND ON THEIR LANDMARK TENTH ALBUM, *HARD UP*, THEY OUTDO THEMSELVES IN VIRTUALLY EVERY WAY POSSIBLE. FOUNDING FRETMASTER **LANCE FERGUSON** LETS US IN ON THE SECRETS BEHIND IT.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA.** PHOTO BY **IAN LAIDLAW.**

Since the dawn of the new millennium, The Bamboos have reigned as one of the brightest and most unflinching acts in Australian funk and soul. And although plans to celebrate their 20th anniversary were put on ice by last year's plague, the Melbourne-native nonet have no plans to settle any time soon. Case in point: their formula-shattering tenth studio album, *Hard Up*.

In effort to eviscerate The Bamboos' time-tested status quo, the band opted not to record LPX in a studio. Instead, they headed to the North Victorian countryside town of Lancefield (no relation to ringleader Lance Ferguson), renting out a mansion where they'd spend a little over a week jamming out to their hearts' content. Collaboration was key, with all nine members throwing their unique musical voices into the mix. The end result is an irrefutably expressive record, jam-packed with rhapsodic rhythms and gloriously groovy beats.

Australian Guitar got down to wire with Ferguson to vibe on the unusually breezy backstory behind *Hard Up*, and why out of all the guitars he had at his disposal, the star of the show became a prized Gibson ES-125 TDC.

What was it like to make this record off the grid for a change?

It's something that we've always wanted to do. We've been together for 20 years, and I don't know how long we'd been talking about this, but it seems like forever. Usually it's kind of rushed – when you get into the studio, the clock is ticking and you've got to be as efficient as you can in there. And we've always thought, "What if we went up to the countryside and converted a house into our own studio for a week or two? What if we had the luxury of doing drum takes in the middle of the night without disturbing anyone?" And we just finally did it!

We converted the lounge room into the rhythm section's room, the horns were in the dining room, the control room was in one of the bedrooms... It was really cool. And we took the MO of going song by song. Everyone was in there working together, and we just threw everything we could at a song until we got it to a point that we felt we all liked. It was a much nicer way to do it. Y'know, when you get a group of people you like, with a common goal in mind, and you've got all the time in the world to throw around ideas, great stuff can happen.

Did you all have a looser sort of approach to the creative process in general?

Yeah, I think so. Usually I'll make demos for all the tracks, and they're fairly detailed, and sometimes a guitar part or a keyboard part will make it into the finished track if it's really close to how I'm imagining the finished track would sound. Typically when we'd go into the studio, it would be about emulating those demos and making them sound cleaner or tighter – but for this record, because we had the luxury of more time, some of those demos got completely turned on their head.

We'd come up with completely different grooves on certain songs, or take them in completely different directions. And that was great, because when there's more than one brain interpreting something, you end up with a much more dynamic sound. If anything, it took a lot of pressure off me – I found it far more enjoyable, personally, because everyone was putting in more creative energy, and it wasn't necessarily all on me to call the shots.

Did you find that in really taking on everyone's opinions and ideas, you wound up with a more diverse, or more exciting set of sounds?

It's hard for me to give some perspective on that, because I don't know what the listener's experience will be when they listen to a track. If you as a listener are feeling that in comparison to some of our other stuff, I definitely think the collaborative aspects of this album's process would have something to do with it, for sure.

What guitars did you have up in Lancefield?

I filled my car up with guitars – as many as I could fit in – and took them all up there. But I kept coming back to one particular guitar, which was an ES-125 TDC – basically a thinline hollowbody with two P-90s on it. I strung it up with flat-wounds, and it just sounded incredible. There's something about the flat-wounds, and the kind of percussive spank they give you – especially on the bottom E and A strings, doubling bass riffs and things like that. If you listen to the tune "Ride On Time", the double track was recorded with that guitar, and it just melds so well with the bass.

I did also have an old Harmony Meteor – I think it's the model Keith Richards was using in the early days, with the gold DeArmond pickups on it. So that had a bit of a different kind of sound – definitely compared to your average Fender or Gibson. But on the tune "Hard Up", for the first time I actually pulled out a Stratocaster. That's the debut Bamboos track with a Stratocaster – it's very unexpected for us, but that tune needed more of a straight-up blues-influenced kind of solo, and the Strat was just the perfect for the job.

What did you love so much about that ES-125?

I bought it off Tom Martin from The Putbacks – he's such a great guitarist, and he sold me that guitar... It would've been around 2008 I think. The way he advertised it was, "Get that Grant Green tone," which had me sold straight away. I've had it for about 13 years, and I used it on all those Cookin' On 3 Burners albums as well. It just feels good!

Stock or tweaked?

I am a little bit of a collector, but I'm not the sort of collector that puts things away in glass cases – the MO is that they need to be things I can take out and jam on. So I have kept pretty much everything stock on the handful of guitars around me at the moment. I do put Tune-o-Matic bridges on my archtops and hollowbodies, just because they do their job really well on those guitars. But I think guitars are there to be played – I know it sounds like a very obvious line to put in a guitar magazine, but I really do love to just get my hands on every piece I can.

Tone is like colour, and each guitar has a different palate with which you can paint a picture. Why limit yourself to just blue, green and yellow if you've got a whole rainbow at the ready?

Yeah, that's right! See, I was always pretty ignorant about the Fender Jazzmaster – it wasn't the kind of guitar I would ever own. But a few years ago I had an endorsement from Fender, and they gave me a Jazzmaster – it was one of the reissued classic models they put out – and I found that yeah, it was a Fender guitar, but it didn't have a tone that was immediately identifiable. And that's partly because it was foreign to me, I'm sure – all the Jazzmaster fans out there will go, "Of course it does" – but I found that we could meld it into certain songs in a way that made it really sink into the mix. It sounded almost *mysterious*, which I loved.

THE (MIS)ADVENTURES OF RAG'N'BONE MAN

FOR THE FOLLOW-UP TO HIS WICKEDLY SUCCESSFUL DEBUT, BRITISH SINGER-SONGWRITER **RORY GRAHAM** (A.K.A. **RAG'N'BONE MAN**) BUCKS THE TREND OF MAINSTREAM POP ARTIFICIALITY WITH THE DEFIANTLY RAW, POWERFULLY AUTHENTIC *LIFE BY MISADVENTURE*. WE CAUGHT UP WITH GRAHAM TO GET THE LOWDOWN ON THIS SOULFUL SHOWPIECE.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **FIONA GARDEN**.

Deftly fusing prismatic prongs of blues, soul, pop, folk, rock, grime and hip-hop, Rag'N'Bone Man simply refuses to be pigeonholed. That's been the case since the East Sussex singer-songwriter, real name Rory Charles Graham, dropped his debut EP *Bluestown* in 2012 – where on one track he croons with a gruff, battered twang alongside dusty acoustic strums and a ripping harmonica solo, and on the next he spits menacing rap bars over jazzy keys and 808 beats.

Graham burst into the mainstream with his full-length debut in 2017, boldly dubbed *Human*. In addition to a torrent of critical acclaim, it earned the distinction of being the fastest-selling debut album by a male artist in the 2010s, debuting in the Top 5 on nine countries' charts (and taking out the #1 spot in five) and selling over 2,000,000 copies worldwide. Naturally, the task of whipping up a sequel came with a fair whack of pressure.

So what do you do when you've got the world staring you down with their hands out, begging rabidly for another dose of slick and soulful indie-pop? Well, if you're in Graham's shoes, you up the ante with an even bolder, more daring soul-pop sound that dives evermore deeper into the realm of glassy, operatic soundscapes flourished with keys, synths and strings. Hashing the record out in Nashville with a team of world-renowned musicians including guitarist Wendy Melvoin, Graham wears his soul on his sleeve on *Life By Misadventure*.

As the record starts making waves and fans clamour desperately for a tour (soon, he swears), Graham sat down with *Australian Guitar* to fill us in on why *Life By Misadventure* is the album he's always wanted to make, and how he was finally able to make it a reality.

After the past year of insanity, how do you feel now that you're here with a new LP out?

It feels like a long time coming! I've got this overwhelming urge just to get out and play now – it's not just enough to have the record out there. I mean it's great, obviously, but y'know, ever since I started music the normal thing was to release something and then go and tour it – or at least go and play some shows. So yeah, that's a bit difficult. We're looking forward to getting onstage. I think our first gig is mid-June, so we've got something to look forward to.

The first thing any fan will recognise with this record is that it obviously embraces a much different kind of sonic palate – it's a lot more pop-centric, a lot more glittery and melodic – where did this new sound come from?

We wrote pretty much all these songs just on an acoustic, to be honest. It all came from just sitting around a table and writing songs, without the backdrop of production at all. We were all sitting around with notepads and shit – not even looking at our phones or recording into our computers – so it feels like we really concentrated on the songs before anything else was done.

We were like, "Let's try to make these songs as good as they can be before we even *think* about production." And we lived with these songs for ages – we were all done six months before we even started the recording process. That gave us enough time just to sit back and realise exactly what we wanted to do with this record.

So what was that?

I just wanted to get the best musicians I could find, and go to a studio and record it as a band. And that's exactly what we did. I wanted people to feel that when they listen to this record through their headphones or in their cars, they were in the room with us when we were playing it. And it does – it feels more pop, definitely, but it's kind of like the opposite of what's really popular at the moment.

I don't know how this record is going to do on the charts, because with everything else in pop music at the moment, the vocals are always super, super, super clean; not many people are using real bass sounds, all the drums are fully programmed... And I was like, "I want it to sound *live*." And y'know, that's what we did. We thought, "F*** it, let's get in there and jam." You can't have music that sounds wonderful and feels organic when it's played live, then go and make stuff with trap beats.

It was tracked like a live album too, wasn't it?

For real, yeah. I play with my band so much, and I love those days where we spend our whole afternoons just jamming together and learning all the songs. It just feels like a natural, happy place for me. So it was the most fun I've ever had recording an album, for sure. The vocal booth can be a lonely place if there's nobody else around – you've got a producer in the other room and you're somewhere far away... Sometimes it's cool, but it's not that much fun. And when you can vibe with other musicians while you're recording... I don't know, man, there's something different about it. It just felt like a great vibe in the room.

What was it like working with the iconic Wendy Melvoin on this record?

Unfortunately, she was the only person we couldn't actually have jamming with us in the room. Mike Elizondo [producer] played the original guitar parts on the record, and then he said, "Wouldn't it be great if we got Wendy in here?" And I was like, "Well it would be great, but I don't have her number in my phone book!" That's not someone I can just ring and say, "Hey, wanna play on my record?" She'd be like, *"Who the f*** are you!?"*

So y'know, props to Mike and his little black book of amazing musicians. He was like, "Yeah, I think I can get Wendy" – and he did! And she spent two or three weeks just tracking each song, replacing all the guitar parts – but in such a beautiful, cinematic way. Her playing is so distinctive, and she's just added a real depth to this record, y'know? Her guitar playing is incredible, I was very lucky to have her.

So tapping into this more operatic, piano-driven sound, how did your approach to the guitar change?

Well I mean, the guitar is my instrument. I'm not a virtuoso or anything, but that's always been how I've written songs. I'm not much of a keys player. But I commandeered the piano player from my band – he's written all the songs with me... He's the melody guy too – I'm much more about lyrics, and he's the guy that comes up with the great melodies. So I mean, it was always going to be more piano-driven because that's where the tunes came from.

What is that acoustic you write on?

Okay, so I played Lollapalooza in... 2018, I think? And just before I left, my friend said, "You should go and check out the Chicago Music Exchange." And I was like, "Okay, let's go! We don't really have any room in our luggage, but y'know, f*** it."

I remember picking up something like a Martin 00 – it was one of the newish models – and the guy behind the counter pulled that classic sales technique where he was like, "Oh, you don't want *that* one, you want *this* one!" And he went into the back and got this... Essentially it was the same Martin, but it was a '50s model – I think it's from 1952 – and the thing just sounded *f***ing incredible*. It's beautiful. It makes me feel like I'm better than I actually am *[laughs]*. So that's my guitar of choice at the moment.

I did get a J-45 as well, which was also from the '50s – she's a little bit beat-up, but she still sounds nice. She's proper woody soundin'.

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ARCADE GAMES

REJUVENATED BY A LINEUP SHUFFLE AND A SPIRITED NEW CREATIVE DYNAMIC, SCOTTISH ROCKERS **TEENAGE FANCLUB** MAKE ALBUM #11 ANOTHER EFFORTLESS HIT. CO-FRONTMAN **NORMAN BLAKE** RIFFS WITH US ON THE LOOSE 'N' LUCID PROCESS BEHIND *ENDLESS ARCADE*.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **DONALD MILNE**.

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For their cool and cruisy 11th album (12th if you count *Words Of Wisdom And Hope*, their '02 team-up with Jad Fair), Teenage Fanclub honed in on the art of introspection. *Endless Arcade* feels distinctly human, the Scottish rockers weaving sharp and soulful tales of hope, home, love and loss around passages of airy pop and fuzzy surf-rock. As for its seemingly nonsensical title, co-frontman Raymond McGinley explains, "I think of an endless arcade as a city that you can wander through, with a sense of mystery, an imaginary one that goes on forever. When it came to choosing an album title, it seemed to have something for this collection of songs."

Even without McGinley's philosophical context, the title feels apt for *Endless Arcade*. There's a lucid sense of serpentine mystique to the 45-minute affair, making its sentimental edge feel all the more enthralling. Authenticity and ambiguity don't typically go hand in hand, but especially here, Teenage Fanclub deal in both with spectacular tact. Such is the result of an impenetrable chemistry between McGinley and Norman Blake, who together share lead vocal, guitar and songwriting duties. The role was split three ways until Gerard Love left in 2018, but even without their former bassist, the spirit of Teenage Fanclub has never been this stout.

Australian Guitar caught Blake on a rare day off to chat about the loose and lively origins of *Endless Arcade*, and how its analogue flair is a cornerstone of the band's time-tested gear collection.

I wanted to bring up a quote from the press release, which noted that in terms of the songwriting process, "We don't conceptualise, we don't talk about it, we just do it." Is that crucial to capturing the energy and the sonic character of Teenage Fanclub?

I think it is. Raymond will come in and he'll present his song, and it's never questioned – we don't have a discussion about what the song is about, or what we want to add to it. We'll just accept what he brings to the band – we trust each other with their own ideas.

We like to create something in the moment, and we like to record as live as possible – we set up in the room together with spill between the amps and the guitars and the drums and whatever – and we like to be looking at each other. And we'll get the bulk of a song down there and then. We'll overdub vocals and the odd guitar part or something like that, but we want to just capture that moment. That's the way we've worked for a number of years, but especially so on this album.

Maybe on previous albums, whoever had written a song would direct things a little bit – y'know, suggest a drum part or suggest what they would like the bass to do – but with this record, Raymond and I would go into the room, we'd play the song through once, and then everyone would come in and work on their own parts. So it really was a collective effort in that sense.

I suppose after 30-something years, there'd be a level of intuition and faith in each other's talents.

There absolutely is! Raymond always comes up with really interesting guitar runs. He's obviously our lead guitarist – I mostly do the rhythm stuff and pick up the odd lead here and there, but Raymond will always find the most appropriate sound that works for the song, and something that the rest of us will find tasteful. I mean, when you play with people for as long as we've played together, you get to kind of know what they're going to bring to the table. And they know what you're looking for.

We have all the gear that we've been using for years: Raymond's got his pre-CBS '63 Jag that goes into his late '50s Deluxe, and I've got my 1970 335 that play through a stock AC15 with one of those little XOTIC EP Boosters in front of it. I keep the volume [on the XOTIC EP Booster] zeroed out, because when the guitar goes through that circuit, it just makes the AC15 sound really great. Sometimes I would use a little '70s Champ, but y'know, it's a really simple setup – I guess that's given us some continuity over the years.

What is it about that 335 that you just can't get enough of?

It's just really playable. Obviously we bought that pre-Internet – I think I've probably had that guitar for about 25 years. We were gear shopping in Cleveland, in the States, having a look around in this real small store, and I think Raymond said to the guy that owned the place, "This is all real nice, but do you have anything else?" And he's like, "Oh yeah, I've got a couple of little things down in the basement." And he brought that guitar up, and it was in mint condition – in fact, it had been in the case for so long that there was a tag lying on top of the guitar, and it had been dormant for so long that it made an imprint in the lacquer. I think we paid something like $350 for it. The same day, Raymond picked up a post-CBS Jag in candy apple red, a 1963 model, and that wasn't expensive either. Those were some great days, back when you could find those crazy special guitars for basically pocket change.

And then we've got that one-of-a-kind XOTIC EP Booster pedal...

It's might be the best pedal I've ever owned! It's just amazing. I mean, what it does to the tone of the guitar... Y'know, like I said, I don't even turn it up, because the circuit alone is just incredible. I turn it on and leave it at zero, and it just puts something really nice in the signal path. And then I've got a little thing called a Teenage Fanboost that was made by an Aussie friend of mine, Tym – he'd asked me if there was something I wanted that I didn't have, and I said, "Well, I'd like to have a boost pedal where I could select different frequencies to boost." And so he made me one! Then I've got an MXR Micro Amp that I'll sometimes kick in, and that's pretty much it.

So you and Raymond each have six of the songwriting credits on this record. Where did the idea come from to split the workload in half for this one?

I think part of it comes down to the idea that there's less of a burden on one person to come up with all the songs. If we share the load, it should mean that we can come up with a stronger album. When Gerard [Love, vocals/bass] was in the band, we'd split the songwriting three ways – we'd gotten to the point where we would only write four songs each. And we've got ourselves set on doing 12-track albums, so with Jerry out of the picture, it meant that we had to come up with two more each. But y'know, that wasn't that much of a stretch – when you write songs for an album, you usually have a few more ideas than you need anyway.

Are there any big differences between your respective songwriting styles?

It's difficult to say! I mean, we probably have a similar approach to writing songs in that there's always verses and choruses, and often a solo as well. Thematically, they're probably a bit different – Raymond comes up with a lot more things that are based in arpeggios, whereas mine will be a little more more chordal; more straight-ahead. But obviously, all of us playing on the songs together kind of homogenises it a bit, and makes it sound like *us*.

A PEARL OF A STRAT

WITH THE GAME-CHANGING *GIGATON*, **PEARL JAM** INJECTED THE ROCK WORLD WITH SOME WELL-EARNED SPIRIT IN THE MIDST OF A TURBULENT 2020. NOW THAT WE'VE ALL HAD A CHANCE TO SOAK IN THE WICKED RIFFS THAT PILLAR IT, LEAD GUITARIST **MIKE MCCREADY** IS GIVING US A CHANCE TO SHRED THEM OUT FOR OURSELVES, THANKS TO HIS NEW SIGNATURE FENDER STRATOCASTER.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **DANNY CLINCH**.

On their own respective accords, the words 'custom' and 'shop' are both very lucrative terms to any dedicated guitarist. Put them together, however, and watch the ears of any shredder with a spending problem prick up faster than a labrador at dinnertime. The Fender Custom Shop is a venerable Valhalla for gear nerds, with some of the world's best luthiers forging monumental works of amp-ready art on the daily. And one extremely popular aspect of their craftsmanship lies in the recreation of classic guitars made iconic by some of music's most illustrious names. Like, for example, Mike McCready of Pearl Jam.

After knocking it out of the park with his riffs on last year's critically adored *Gigaton* album, McCready is continuing his six-stringed lightning streak with a (super limited) Custom Shop build of his classic 1959 Stratocaster… Or, well, so was the intention. Y'see, McCready bought the guitar in 1991, enamoured by the virtuosic playing of Stevie Ray Vaughan on his own '59 Strat. And by all reasonable knowledge, McCready thought he was picking up the exact same model – that's what it said on the tag, at least. But only after Fender borrowed the guitar to spec it up this year that it came to light his Strat was actually a 1960 model.

This wouldn't normally be a big deal, of course, but for McCready – who has the number 59 tattooed on himself in dedication of the axe… Well… *Yeah*.

Nevertheless, McCready's 1960 Stratocaster is an absolute marvel, and the Fender Custom Shop have done an inhumanly kit-accurate recreation for their release. We caught up with the man behind the madness himself to discuss the origin story behind this beloved behemoth of a guitar, why certain guitars are simply more special than others, and how master builder Vincent Von Trigt made the ultimate doppelgänger of the Strat that never stops.

Do you remember when you first got your hands on this Strat?

All those years ago… It's a little blurry for me. Let's just say I was more of a partier back in my early 20s [*laughs*]. It was right around when we first started having some success, so just prior to 1991. I played it at our first show with Keith Richards in '91 – we opened up for the Stones in New York, and that's the first time I ever brought it out with me. I bought it right before that show, I believe at Danny's Music in Everett, in Seattle, and I think it was something like $7,000 back then.

And it was very significant – the only guitars I had prior to that were a '62 Strat, which Jeff [Ament] and Stone [Gossard] got for me, and I had a Telecaster and an acoustic. So this was a big deal – it was my first, "Okay, I'm going to spend some money on a really nice guitar" moment. I wanted a '59 Strat because Steve Ray Vaughn played it, and y'know, he was my *guy* at that time – and still is to this day. It played perfectly when I picked it up that first time, and it's played that way ever since.

Do you find that Strats make for good workhorse guitars on the road?

I feel like I've always heard Telecasters be called the workhorse – Springsteen's got one, Joe Strummer has one, Eddy [Vedder] plays them… I've got a couple Teles as well, but for me personally, that '60 Strat is my go-to. I always use it on "Even Flow", I use it on "Star Spangled Banner… I used it on one of our new songs, "Dance Of The Clairvoyants", and I used it specifically for that song because I knew I wanted *that* sound. That guitar will deliver the sound I'm thinking of 99 percent of the time.

Do you feel like certain guitars inspire creativity, or help the songwriting process more than others do?

Yes, I do. If we go all the way back to *Ten*, thinking about what I was going to play underneath Stone's riff on "Alive" – he was on a Les Paul and I had, at that time, my black Stratocaster, and the idea for my part came out of what the Strat sounded like. Because I wanted to have something that was not *exactly* like Stone's riff, but rather supported it – something that was kind of mellow during the first and second verse, but when it kicks in for the chorus, would let me pick up all the volume and have my Strat duel his Les Paul. And I think guitars do that, y'know? I have a certain acoustic that I like to learn things on, too. I can think about what kind of sound I want, but I have to feel it in a guitar to get it out.

Some guitars just have a unique character.

Exactly – it's the character, it's the colour, it's the feeling of the sound. Does it scream in a solo? Can I get feedback on it? Can I control the grunt? Can I make it really light and relaxed? And I can do all of that with my '60 Strat.

Have you made any customisations to that guitar since you bought it?

It's exactly how I got it, except that I'd broken the tremolo bar a bunch of times. I believe the pickups are all original; some of the knobs might be original, but I don't think they are; and the tuning pegs are not original. That's how I approach guitars in general – I'm not precious with them, y'know? I mean, I let people come over to my house and play my guitars all the time. I'm like, "Yeah, you can play that $10,000 guitar," and they're like, "Are you sure?" And I'm just like, "That's what they're for!"

So what was it like teaming up with the Fender Custom Shop to recreate it?

I got a call and George Webb, who's the head of our old warehouse and Jeff's bass tech – he got a call from Michael Schulz at Fender asking if I wanted to do a model of my "1959" Strat. I was like, "F*** yeah, that sounds amazing!" He came up with another guy – I forget the name of the other gentleman, but they looked at it and looked at all the other Strats I have – a '57 and a '58 – and the '60 was the one that they were the most interested in. And I can see why – it's a perfect guitar!

Michael was very easy to deal with – he's an artist relations guy, he knows about music, he plays guitar himself… And I got to go out to the Fender factory and look at how the whole operation runs. I got a tour of the factory and got to meet the master craftsmen… It's truly unbelievable how they do everything – from the wood, to the machines, to the drying of the paint. But it was also a very easy process.

Were you very hands-on with Vincent Van Trigt and the Custom Shop team?

George and I were pretty hands on with Vincent – who really did a phenomenal, unbelievable job on this guitar. I remember when George got the first prototype in; I played it through a couple different amps, and there were a few things I wanted changed: I wanted the neck to be a little smaller and form to my hand like it does on my original Strat – and Vincent had no problem with that. There were a couple of cosmetic things, like making more dents in it and scratching it up a bit more… So it went back and forth… Actually, I think just that one time.

That's the thing about Fender: they're very efficient, but it's not like an uptight or rushed efficiency – they just get their shit done, and you get your product very quickly. And it's perfect. And so when I got it back the second time, I had taken it and put it right next to my original one, I left the room and went and did something, and when I came back in, I grabbed it thinking it was my real one. So I'm playing it and just going, "Oh shit, wait a second!" That happened three times – three *separate* times, too. That should tell you how meticulous Vincent's work is.

SAVING THE WORLD, ONE RIFF AT A TIME

WITH THE INFALLIBLE COMBO OF PUNISHINGLY POWERFUL RIFFS AND A FIERCE HUNGER FOR REVOLUTION, THE MODERN METAL TITANS IN **GOJIRA** TAKE AIM AT THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL ON THEIR CONVULSIVE NEW ALBUM, *FORTITUDE*.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **GABRIELLE DUPLANTIER**.

From the perspective of your average, casual music fan – think the suburban mum sees P!nk as the pinnacle of rock music, or the stock-trading suit who swears songwriting peaked with The Beatles – metalheads are the human embodiment of recklessness and depravity. But look past the gory and gristly aesthetics and you'll find one of the friendliest, most sympathetic and benevolent communities on the planet. Wherever tragedy strikes, you can be sure to find at least one long-haired brute in a ragged Metallica shirt ready to help out.

Notably so in recent years, progressive activism has become a cornerstone of the heavy music scene. Case in point: French groove-metallers Gojira, who've long championed environmental causes with their equally emotive and explosive shreddery. Their seventh album, *Fortitude*, looks to mobilise mosh-fiends around the world to fight for their freedoms, uphold equality and make their voices heard to secure a future for their planet. It's a notably optimistic record for the band, too, adding to their standard fare of cataclysmic riffs and punishing breakdowns a summery slant of melodic buoyancy.

As lead vocalist and rhythm guitarist Joe Duplantier tells *Australian Guitar*, Gojira's modus operandi was to take listeners on a uniquely energetic and kaleidoscopic journey with *Fortitude*.

How did your approach to the guitars differ on this record? Were you excited to explore any new techniques or playing styles?

Yeah! I'm constantly searching for and experimenting with new ideas. I think the production for this album was the most exciting, for me, because of all the experimentation I did in the studio. I would try a certain guitar with a certain amp for a certain part. I played a solo, for example, and there was this buzz coming from the guitar that we couldn't get rid of – so I ended up taking an old string, attaching it to the bridge of the guitar and putting it in my mouth. That was the only way I could get rid of the buzz – I became the ground wire! Sometimes when you're using old gear, you have to use weird tricks.

It was mostly just having a blast trying a lot of different pedals and instruments, and committing new ideas to memory as we were recording. There are a few really big solos on this record, which is pretty new for Gojira. It's about having fun, but also trying to create something powerful – we want to be melting faces [*laughs*]. That's very important for us. We want to make a f***ing impression! Nobody plays our music when they're having a cocktail, y'know?

How did you want this record to best represent what Gojira is and means, and stands for in the present day?

Every album is a statement, so to speak – it's about what we want to see and what we want to do. And it's a much different story when you release your seventh album than when you release your first. Somehow your first album will define you, nobody's waiting for you, you have this opportunity to maybe surprise people – or to make absolutely no noise at all. You never know what's going to happen with a first album, right? But with a seventh album, when everybody's waiting for what you're going to do, the approach is a bit different. We wanted to express something positive, colourful, flamboyant, intense, luxurious... Y'know, I think we wanted to be generous with this album, from a certain perspective – we give you a lot of melodies and explore a lot of crazy ideas. It's a trip.

I saw that *Kerrang!* interview where you said you wanted this album to be more outgoing and joyful, and I think that really comes across on the record. Where did that newfound sense of optimism come from?

It's a choice by default, y'know? It's easy to be cynical or depressed about humanity. But if you choose to look at the bad things, you're going to have a bad day. If you look at the beautiful things around you, you're going to have a great day. And there's a lot of beautiful things around us! But that being said, *Fortitude* is not just a positive album – there's a lot of anger, still, there's a lot of turmoil and it's a bit stormy at times. But especially after *Magma*, yeah, the contrast is overall more joyful and more celebratory.

We decided to have fun. And I think that's the point. When we talk about joy, it doesn't really translate to the music itself – for somebody who has no clue who we are, they're not going to find this joyful like an ABBA album. But it's an invitation to be strong and to stand together – even if at times I don't believe myself when I say that, because I think humans are pretty shitty sometimes, we're as horrible as we are incredible.

Well, look at all these protests happening around the world – they're fuelled by anger, 100 percent, but that anger is rooted in a determination to make positive changes in the world.

I think that's very important – we need to protest. Even if there's nothing to complain about, we still need to go out in the streets and make ourselves heard. That's the French way, my man – every September, every year, we're all out there in the streets. What are we angry about? I dunno! But let's do it! [*Laughs*]. But yes, that's the purpose of the whole thing – if you're angry by nature, it's like okay, whatever, what's the point?

For example in Brazil, people don't protest that much – they're not known to go out in the street and use their voices, and that leads to someone like [Jair] Bolsonaro taking charge. I think we need to find a balance – and it's not only about protesting, either. It's also the inner revolution, y'know? The potential that is underlying within you.

Every second, you have the opportunity to change something for yourself. *We* have the power. And it's an illusion to think that we don't – that "the president" has the power. Because if you decide to buy a certain way – if you decide to pay attention to where things are built, for example, and you don't want to promote a crazy dictator who is out of his mind and exploiting the children of his country, don't buy the shit that comes out that country! Because when you do, you become the problem.

It's a cliche to say, "We are manipulated! They do this, they do that!" You know this famous 'they'? 'They' is us, y'know? We are 'they' creating 'them' – the demand creates the disaster. And I know it doesn't sound very metal – I get it. But the way you consume is super important, as is the way you talk to people and the way you act. That's the core of my message: we can do things to change the world!

To give you an example: we felt bad about the fires in the Amazon, seeing all those forests burn to the ground two years ago, so we decided to do something with the release of our single "Amazonia". We ended up talking to some of the indigenous tribes that live in the Amazon, and we were really shocked to learn that the indigenous were – and are – under attack. So we just said, "Damn, let's do something!" Of course we have a band and we have fans to rally around us, but even if we didn't, we could have gathered support for that cause.

A ROYAL STORM

FOR ALBUM #3, **ROYAL BLOOD** SHED THE LIMITATIONS OF A TWO-PIECE TO DELIVER A HARD-OUT EPIC OF EXPLOSIVE PUNK, GROOVE-LADEN SOUL AND RIP-ROARING DANCE-ROCK. SINGER AND SHREDDER **MIKE KERR** TELLS US HOW IT ALL CAME TO LIFE.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **MADS PERCH**.

The human body is intrinsically cruel: it's the tastiest treats that do the worst damage to our teeth, the most exhilarating activities that hasten our decay, and the most euphonious sounds – big, belting rock 'n' roll riffs – that pose the most risk to our eardrums. Listening to Royal Blood with our headphones cranked to their absolute limits may do wondrous things for our serotonin transporters, but it certainly isn't *healthy* for us in the long run. But oh well – you only live once, right?

The first two Royal Blood albums were all about getting heads thrashing and fists pumping – they're vicious, ultra kinetic nuggets of garage-tinged punk that can turn even the most passive of crowd-dwellers into a bonafide king of the mosh. Especially for a two-piece – one without a proper guitar in their setup, to boot – the Brits did a scary good job delivering volume by more than one definition. And with their third full-length effort, *Typhoons*, they've gone even bigger, boomier and more banger-driven.

Influenced by EDM stalwarts like Daft Punk and Justice, the 11-tracker is tailor-made for the dancefloor, studded with enormous grooves, nacreous melodies and hooks that outright *demand* you chant along. Ironically given the duo can't get to a stage right now – at least not before a crowd on their feet and all crammed into the same sweaty mosh pit – it's a emphatically *live*-feeling energy; the inimitable spirit of Royal Blood in concert is captured perfectly, injected with a newfound luminescence courtesy of the dancier influences.

As he and drummer Ben Thatcher gear up for the live show to make its desperately needed comeback, singer and bassist Mike Kerr sat down with *Australian Guitar* to riff on the ambitious artistic evolution that makes the Royal Blood of 2021 the very best Royal Blood yet.

This record is so different to what a lot of people have come to expect from Royal Blood; were you keen to really shake things up on this record?

Definitely. I think we were looking to kind of create that thing for ourselves, y'know? We wanted it to feel like a debut record, in a sense. I think this is the first time we've really evolved the band's sound, to be honest with you. This is probably the first time we've ever really *surprised* people.

I think the most obvious new thing is just how dance-y this record is. Where did that influence come from?

I think that's always been in our DNA, really. Once we kind of got on that tip and making songs that had that feel feel to them, it just felt like the natural direction for us to take this record in. I don't know, I love the idea of playing really heavy riffs over really danceable beats – it's such an exhilarating combination, and it just became addictive in the studio. And we have 20 songs that we've written before that aren't like that at all – why go back and tread on that ground when we can move forward and play in some new ways?

It's kind of ironic in way – any shows you can do are all seated, but all of these songs seem so perfectly suited for the dancefloor; you've really captured the energy of a Royal Blood concert. Is that something you wanted to really dial in on?

Yeah, but I think there always would've been that frustration with not being able to play a Royal Blood show. Our records have always felt almost like the homework we needed to do so that we could go out and play. And I think this album is very much like [a show] – it's got a real sense of celebration to it, and a real excitement. Playing these songs live has been a real party. We can't wait to get out there to the masses. Those days are coming, certainly, it's just taking a little longer than we were hoping.

What songs are you most excited to play?

Oh man, all of them! "Limbo" is a track that we were rehearsing today, actually, and it just feels so monstrous live. It so epic, it kind of feels like it has to be our closer now – there's nothing bigger-sounding that we have, I don't think. It's a good feeling, man. These songs are definitely poppier in ways, and sort of tighter on the drums, but they probably have the most intricate playing that we've ever done. I think we both pushed ourselves incredibly hard with our abilities – which is a great feeling! At the end of an album cycle, you can usually do it all with your eyes closed. It's really good to feel terrified again.

How did this album take you out of your comfort zone as a player?

I think everything was just so much tighter and more closed-off, and so much more groove-oriented. It took me out of my comfort zone in the sense that it's a totally different way of playing – it's a lot more rhythmically intricate, so singing and doing that at the same time, yeah, I'm hanging on by a thread at the minute [*laughs*]. It's so difficult, but it's a lot of fun. And I think because the beats are more closed-off and dancier, there's like… Well, there was nowhere for me to hide before, but now I'm completely naked. I basically can't f*** up at all anymore.

Does that make the show more exciting, or liberating even, when you pull off a sick riff and a killer hook in the same punch?

Definitely, yeah. Playing these songs live, I feel like we're doing the greatest magic trick we've ever seen each other do. It's an amazing feeling. I think it was Josh Homme that said, "It's like doing the world's largest heist with the three greatest bank robbers." And that's how I kind of feel right now – like, "Oh my God, we're actually doing it! Okay!"

What was your recording setup like?

I essentially did everything on my short-scale Fender Jaguar, which is my go-to bass. I actually feel sorry for it – it's always getting ripped in and out of tunings to suit whatever I'm trying to come up with at the time. And then to be honest with you, for songs like "Typhoons", I didn't really use any pedals. I just went straight into this tiny little practise amp, and then straight from that into Logic.

Do you feel like that rawness and bare-bones feel aides in capturing the live energy of Royal Blood?

Yeah, I think so. I didn't intend for the master recording to be what I was using at the time. I have such a huge bass sound that it's easy for me to get caught up in the sonics of it. So for me it was like, if I simplify my sound, then it puts more pressure on the composition of the part. And that pushed me to write better parts, y'know, rather than just play three notes and make them sound huge.

What makes that Jag so special?

It doesn't even feel like an instrument. It feels like a toy. It's so small and light. I don't really like anything to feel serious or professional – I mean, don't get me wrong, it's very well-made, and I didn't pay for it but it's probably really expensive. But it's what I sit around the house playing, it's what I play shows with, it's got my blood, sweat and tears all over it… It's a part of me. And it hasn't really failed me, either. There's been times where I've looked to it desperately for ideas, and it's always given me the answers.

GOD DAMN!

NO GODS NO MASTERS. THAT'S THE TITLE OF THE HOTLY AWAITED NEW JAM-FEST FROM THE POP-ROCK MAINSTAYS IN **GARBAGE** – BUT IT'S ALSO THE MISSION STATEMENT THEY AVOWED WHEN THEY GATHERED IN THE CALIFORNIAN DESERT TO MAKE IT.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **JOSEPH CULTICE**.

According to Garbage frontwoman Shirley Manson, it was fitting that *No Gods No Masters* – the impending new long-player from the millennial pop-rock powerhouse – came at this specific point in their timeline. "This is our seventh record, the significant numerology of which affected the DNA of its content: the seven virtues, the seven sorrows, and the seven deadly sins," she declared in a press statement. "It was our way of trying to make sense of how f***ing nuts the world is and the astounding chaos we find ourselves in. It's the record we felt that we had to make at this time."

The 11-track jaunt is a vicious and visceral scolding of capitalism, bigotry and political corruption, spun through the band's ever-enigmatic web of brisk, booming pop music. Sonically, it's a smack back to the late-'90s heyday of mid-fi power-pop that Garbage came of age in. In a bid to rekindle their youthful vigour, the band voyaged out to the vast nothingness of the Californian desert – where for two weeks, they holed up in a house borrowed from a relative of guitarist Steve Marker, jammed up a storm, and sewed the seeds of an erratic discontent that would fuel their seventh album.

As we learned from Marker in a Zoom call, that capricious, bare-bones approach to songwriting was just what Garbage needed to reach new heights and embrace an adolescent sense of creative energy they'd thought had long since been shed. *No Gods No Masters* may be the album's title, but it's also the band's new manta for life.

Where did the idea come from to make this record out in the desert?

Well, I think we've done some of our best writing when we were all together. We live all over the country and tend to do things over email or via phone, and it never is as good as when all four of us are sitting in the same little room, with some beer and a little tape recorder, just jammin' out. When we made our first albums, we were basically living together in this really small studio in the midwest – and we were hoping to get back to that vibe.

So we had a little house that we borrowed, and we all moved in for a couple of weeks to start the writing, and we just kind of found the spark again. We would get up at the crack of noon and have a couple cocktails, and basically just start jamming. We had guitars and keys and everything set up in this little living room, and we had no preconceptions or baked-in ideas – there were no demos that people brought in, it was all just whatever happened in the moment. And I think we came out with some really great stuff!

Do you find that your surroundings can really influence your creative mindset?

I think it does, for sure. Y'know, we'd love to be able to go all over the world – you hear about all these exotic places that bands went in the '70s, making records in Switzerland or India or wherever – but we can't really afford to do that. We could afford to borrow this house, though, so that's what we did. And I don't know, the desert is really beautiful.

I actually ended up moving here because I liked it so much. I wanted to be closer to the band. Butch [Vig, drums] and Shirley [Manson, vocals] live in LA so I was planning to move out there, but then the pandemic hit so I ended up here in the desert. But it's great – it kind of gives you an open mindset, y'know? It's a big, wide horizon with not that much in the way, and I think that frees you up to be really creative in a way.

How much material did you come out of those desert sessions with?

There are six or seven songs on the album that got their start in those first few days. And there's a couple that didn't get changed much at all after that. There's one called "Uncomfortably Me" that was basically done there on the spot – we just felt like it had a good vibe, and that was it.

Things tend to get reworked a lot after we finish the initial sessions – y'know everybody's got their little home studios and everybody keeps tinkering all the time, trying to make things better – but I think it was really important to try to keep the initial spirit that we had when we wrote these songs. And a lot of the stuff Shirley came up with off the top of her head, as far as I know, a lot of those ideas are right there on the record.

Do you reckon you can hear that spontaneity in the final product?

I certainly hope so! I think that spontaneity is what goes with the moments that people latch onto when they hear a record. You can rework things to death – and I'm sure it's the same as writing for you, y'know, you can do things over and over so much that a story kind of loses its spark. We've been around for a while now, obviously, and I think some of our better moments were the ones that got done really quickly, without a lot of thought. It's always more about feel than thought.

One of our first singles, "Stupid Girl" – we came up with the basic music for that in about ten minutes. There wasn't a lot of worrying about what was going to happen, or going, "Is anybody going to like this?" We just *did it*, and we put it out because we liked it. And hopefully we've gotten back to that attitude – we'd been trying to for years, but I think we were actually successful on this album.

What was your studio setup like in the way of guitars?

So it was recorded in Shirley's husband's little... It's hardly even a studio. It's a mix room, but it's just crammed full of lots of weird gear. He tends to collect these bizarre, old, like, '60s and '70s Japanese guitars. He's got this huge pile of weird shit. We tend to go for something that's got a real vibe to it, rather than the newest shredder guitars – because those guitars might be set up perfectly and look beautiful and everything, but they have no personality. If something is beat-up and kind of offbeat, that's probably what we're going to pick up.

We've got some old Fenders that we used quite a bit. Billy [Bush, producer] has got this incredible 1960s Strat that actually has B.B. King's autograph scratched into it with a nail. It's always more inspiring to play the weird shit like that. But definitely Telecasters – they're something we use all the time.

I really like the EOB Strat with the sustainer circuit in it; I used that in the way you might typically use a keyboard pad. And I'm really excited because in the next couple of weeks, I'm getting my own to use for our summer tour. That's a really fascinating instrument for me – I love to think about what I could do with that kind of thing. It's kind of like having an e-bow built into your guitar.

One other thing I was going to mention is that Billy's got a Maton from one of our trips over to Australia – he's got a beautiful guitar that they made for him when we were over in Melbourne – and we used that a bunch, too.

INSIDE OUT

RAP-ROCK SINGER-SONGWRITER **K.FLAY** SHARES HER 'LESS IS MORE' PHILOSOPHY AS SHE DETAILS HER SIX-STRING JOURNEY SO FAR.

WORDS BY **JACOB UITTI**.
PHOTO BY **KOURY ANGELO**.

Illinois-born, Los Angeles-based songwriter and performer K.Flay (born Kristine Meredith Flaherty) has never been afraid to show a little teeth. Whether listening to her snarling, Grammy-nominated hit "Blood In The Cut", or the boisterous tracks off her forthcoming five-track EP, *Inside Voices* – out June 11 via BMG – K.Flay's music bites with a force bolstered by sharp, scathing lyrics and often riff-heavy production.

With *Inside Voices*, the Billboard chart-topping artist will release her second record in about a year. She released her EP, *Don't Judge A Song By Its Cover*, in 2020, but her new collection is some of her best work to date. The EP includes the acerbic tracks "Four Letter Words" and "Good Girl", along with powerful and percolating "TGIF", which boasts Rage Against The Machine guitarist Tom Morello. Also featured on the album is Blink-182 drummer Travis Barker on the song "Dating My Dad".

We caught up with K.Flay to ask how her late father influenced her love of guitar, the instruments and pedals she can't live without, and what it was like to work with Morello on the new EP.

You've noted how your biological father taught you how to play the guitar. Does his memory still influence your work?

My biological dad has been sort of this ghost-like presence in my life. I was 14 when he died. So, I was a little bit younger. But I think when you have a parent pass away during adolescence, specially, because you've gotten to know them a little bit, but not really, there is this kind of yearning to keep writing the story a little bit. Music kind of offered that.

I think my dad was a very troubled person in many ways. But my mom and my other dad, who raised me and adopted me, always really wanted him to figure prominently in my life, too. They didn't want to erase that memory. I think, for me and for my family, it was this nice way of keeping his legacy alive. My mom frequently will say to me, "Your dad would just be so stoked this was happening! He really liked music and probably, taking his drinking and drug habits into account, would have fit in really well in the world of touring musicians."

But, yeah, I think there was – again, not a super-conscious, but when I reflect back, definitely there is an ode to him and his influence on me and to unfinished business, in a way.

What is your relationship to the instrument today?

For a long time and still, the guitar is often the starting point in my songwriting process. I joke with my manager about how f***ing powerful the low-E string is. Whether it's a riff or a progression, I tend to gravitate in the early stages of the writing process to things that are basic, in a way. I don't say that to denigrate them but I'm not, like – all of the layers and nuance come much later. So, that's where I start, noodling around, essentially.

While there are certainly times when I wish I had technical training, I've actually come to view it as quite a blessing that I don't. Because, again, speaking about this concept of freedom, and I can remember talking to my guitarist on tour about this, who went to music school. Because I was complaining like, "I wish I knew more music theory." But he was like, "I wish I knew less!" So, I think there's probably some sweet spot. But I think one of the things I really like about guitar is that while I have improved my technical ability quite a bit, I still approach the instrument in many ways as a beginner. Or, at least, I have a beginner's mind when it comes to songwriting.

In terms of guitars that mean a lot to me, the number-one guitar, which I inherited from my biological dad, and I don't know the exact year, is a 1950s short-neck Silvertone from a Sears catalogue. He got that when he was a child and he kept it. That's what I learned to play on and I have it still. I obviously don't take that on tour, or anything like that. But that's a guitar that I very frequently write on. It's literally the easiest guitar in the world to play. It's awesome. No action at all. And it sounds great! So, that's certainly my most prized guitar for a number of reasons. But the guitar that I play on tour and have been recording with is a Jaguar that I like a lot. That's been my go-to for the last few years, at least. It's cream, I guess you'd call it.

What was it like working with Tom Morello on "TGIF", and how did it feel when you heard his solo on the track?

That track began with me alone in the studio. The main riff of the song, I wrote and did on my Jazzmaster. I thought it was really cool and I started writing this meandering song. I started writing that first verse when Donald Trump was still president. The world is still run by lunatics, which is the first line of the song. So, that hasn't really changed. But that feeling and that sense was very present in my mind at the moment. So, I started working on it then. It was just this little rough idea how many of my demos are. Me on guitar and I sing a verse and a chorus and then I ask myself, "Is there anything here?"

I started then working on it with two producers, who are my frequent collaborators, though they've never worked on a song of mine together. A guy named Tommy English and a guy named JT Daly. We started working on it and I think at some point – I've been friends with Tom now for about four years. We met – he actually cold emailed me four years ago, which was a really nice email to receive. We have a lot of commonalities. We're from the same suburbs of Chicago, we both went to elite colleges and ended up in music and I had featured on Tom's record.

So, Tommy English, the producer, who is also from the Chicago suburbs, I think he brought up the idea to ask Tom to play on this and to possibly contribute a solo in a big way. The spirit of the song is, I suppose, a primal scream in the face of capitalism, which, of course, I am a part of a feel like I can't escape. So, it felt like it was up Tom's ally thematically. I sent it to him and I think he recorded it the next week. I think the only thing I said was, "Do your thing, as unhinged and as experimental you feel like getting." And I think the second half of his solo is one of my favourite things Tom has done.

Of course what so many people love about Tom, what I love about Tom, is how liberated and original he is. He is unpredictable and endlessly fascinating as a guitar player, in my opinion. So, it was so cool to experience that. I remember we got the files back and were like, "Oh my god!" I was afraid to listen but also mainly excited. Then we heard it and I was so stoked. That was really how it came together. It felt like this really cool collaboration. JT is from Ohio so there's this Midwestern energy to it, which also means something to me.

MAKING THE BEST OF A BAD TIME

ALMOST A WHOLE DAMN DECADE IN THE MAKING, **THE OFFSPRING** ARE OFFICIALLY BACK IN TOP FORM WITH THEIR TIMELY NEW ALBUM, *LET THE BAD TIMES ROLL* – ON WHICH YOU'LL FIND THEM SHREDDING HARDER AND CUTTING SICKER THAN EVER.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **DAVEED BENITO**.

In the nine years since they dropped the icy and introspective *Days Go By*, The Offspring haven't been *entirely* quiet – they've been a festival mainstay everywhere from Austria to Australia, and the latter years of the 2010s were their most prolific on the touring circuit since the '90s – but on the recorded front, fans have been malnourished for much too long. But just when the world needed lively, pit-splitting skate-punk scorchers more desperately than ever, the millennial playlist mainstays pulled through.

Let The Bad Times Roll is a turbulent as it is timely, with tracks that are polarising and political in theme, but unequivocally ripping in sound. '90s kids will glean the most out of its mid-fi production and raucous, rough-around-the-edges shredding à la colossal melodies – but then again, that's par for the course for an Offspring record; it sounds nostalgic, but feels almost uncomfortably on-the-nose for 2021. It invites the listener to confront their modern-day anxieties head-on, but does so in an unusually *fun* way. Again, classic Offspring.

From their studio headquarters in LA, frontman Bryan "Dexter" Holland and guitarist Kevin "Noodles" Wasserman called to fill *Australian Guitar* in on what they aimed to accomplish with *Let The Bad Times Roll*, how their legions of new fans keep the vibes rolling high and mighty, and why it's the beat-up beauties in their guitarsenal that made the record sound so goddamn explosive.

Is there a specific type of vibe or aesthetic that you're interested in capturing on a track nowadays?

Dexter: I feel like we're observers – whether it's the news, or the way someone walks down the street, something just kind of *catches* you. And that's just what I like to write about. There's not any kind of grand plan. There'll be snippets of different ideas, and then eventually you figure out how that puzzle fits together, how those snippets all connect and form somewhat of a song. And in this case, with *Let The Bad Times Roll*... Well, there's a lot of bad times to write about! Inspiration was not exactly in short supply [*laughs*]. We wrote songs about things like opioid addiction and social unrest – of course things that are happening in our own neighbourhoods, but also things that I could tell were happening around the world – and this was what came out.

The Offspring has become such a cultural institution – the kids who were bratty, snot-nosed punks when *Smash* came out now have their own bratty, snot-nosed punks for kids. Does it influence you on a creative level at all, knowing this band's fanbase now spans several generations?

Dexter: I don't think we think much about that when we're going into the studio to create. What we *do* notice, though, is that there are always a lot of very young kids in the front row every night – especially any time we do a festival. They're 14, and they weren't there five years ago when we last went through their towns. Which I think is great. Because y'know, you hear so much about these bands where their fans grow old with them, and then that's it – then they're just kind of done. So it's great to have all these kids come out to our shows. It's almost like there's an age gradient, right? As you move from the front of the stage back to the bar, you see more and more grey hair.

I bring it up because the penultimate track on this record is a throwback to "Gone Away" from 1997. Do you think it's important, as a band that's been at the forefront of modern punk for so long, to celebrate your past and not just ignore it in favour of the new?

Noodles: I don't really think of "Gone Away" as being that old of a song. Y'know, everything from *Smash* 'til now seems like it's all part of the same era to me. But "Gone Away" was a song that we'd been playing on piano during our live set – we kind of strip it down, and that really purifies the emotional part of that song. It's also a very dynamic part of the set every night – it really does touch fans. They've spent years asking us to do a studio recording of that piano version, and we finally decided, "Yeah, that is actually a great idea!"

When you're writing a song, do you think a lot about how it will translate to the stage?

Dexter: I think you imagine it in many different contexts – how will this look in a video? How will this feel live? I think when we come up with something that feels very punk – a song like "This Is Not Utopia", for example – I get really excited thinking, "Oh, the kids are going to go *off* over this!" So I do apply it to a live context, especially if it's a punk kind of song.

Noodles: But that's not to say that if you don't think about it in a live context, it matters too much. When we're in the studio, we're looking for the ideas that make us go, "Oh, that sounds so good!" *Then* we worry about going, "Okay, how are we going to play this live?" But it does feel even better when you're in the studio and you go, "Oh, kids are going to love this when we play it." Like, "Hassan Chop" – that's a freaking breakneck-speed punk song, it's going to be *so* fun to play live! I think the hardcore Offspring fans from way back are going to love that one.

What guitars were you jamming in-studio?

Dexter: The main guitar was a '65 SG Junior with the single P-90 in it, and it just sounds so great. That's been the main guitar for the last few records – at least on [*Let The Bad Times Roll*] and *Days Gone By*. We probably started using it on *Rise And Fall* – but we have a bunch of different guitars here. We'll have Les Pauls and Strats and Teles, and we also have a Malcolm Young signature Gretsch. I've started collecting guitars, so I have some of my old guitars stashed in here.

Dexter: One of the things that Bob [Rock, producer] taught us, which is so great, is that of course the vintage guitars sound the best – they just do...

Noodles: Why is that, though!?

Dexter: I think it's the wood? They could use all those crazy types of wood that you can't use anymore.

Noodles: It's not that the wood is aged or matured?

Dexter: Maybe that's part of it too, but there are woods that are banned now, it's legal to make a guitar out of them.

Noodles: I was a guitar store and I saw this relic Strat, and I went, "Why would they do that to a Strat?" Why don't they just make it sound like an old Strat, but have it look new? Not break up the finish and make it look all worn out. But then I actually picked it up and ended up going home with it that day [*laughs*]. There's something about ageing it and beating it up a little bit that makes it unique, I think. It's not as good as my real '65 Strat that's out in the recording room, but it's pretty good.

Dexter: Well, what Bob taught us is that you don't get the *pristine* '56 or whatever – you get the beat-up one. Because it sounds just as good, and it'll cost a tenth of the price. And the beat-up ones are kind of cooler, anyway.

HOME AND HOSED

ADDING YET ANOTHER GEM TO ONE OF ROCK'S MOST UNPREDICTABLE CATALOGUES, **ST. VINCENT** MARKS A PROMISING NEW ERA WITH A CELEBRATION OF '70S FUZZ, FRISKINESS AND FEROCITY.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **ZACKERY MICHAEL**.

Few artists have a reputation for innovation quite like Annie Clark – better known to the masses as St. Vincent – who, since dropping the chamber-pop classic *Marry Me* in 2007, has continued to reinvent herself with each new release. And not just sonically, either – Clark is a musical method actress, embodying the idiosyncratic spirit of the concept, style and ethos of her current project. On her sixth solo album, *Daddy's Home*, she's a sly, sultry queen of the New York club scene circa 1973, sinking deep down a rabbithole of warm analogue fuzz, velvety grooves and brittle percussion.

An '80s kid herself, Clark looks to the musical palate of rock's early-'70s heyday with a detached, yet unequivocally devoted sense of nostalgia. Add to it the lyrical inspiration of her father coming home from a stint in federal prison, and even if it sucked, we'd still have one of 2021's most interesting albums. But of course, this is St. Vincent we're talking about – *Daddy's Home* is an instant hit on all fronts.

Clark typically goes all in on her albums' campaigns, preferring to meet with her interviewers in-person no matter where in the world they are. Obviously due to the whole 'global health crisis' thing, we had to phone in with Clark over Zoom – but somehow, our chat felt more down-to-earth and intimate than it likely would if we were shoved in a cold office boardroom with PR and managers hovering over our shoulders. Together, we riffed on the instantly memorable sound of *Daddy's Home*, the authenticity of its recording process, and one thing fans of her Ernie Ball signature model should keep their eyes peeled for in the coming months…

After how wild the past year has been, what's the vibe like in your world right now?

I mean, it's actually surprisingly mellow, compared to other times when I've been putting out records. In times past, we would be having this conversation in person – y'know, I would be in Australia for 48 hours to chit chat. So it definitely mellower doing things from home. Which is great, because I never had to kind of get out of the flow of writing. I didn't have to stop the creativity once I finished this record.

So are you already working on the next one?

Yeah, of course! What else am I going to do?

Musically this record is very hazy, funky, proggy – it plays out like a love letter to that little bubble of rock history in the '60s and '70s. How did you want to encapsulate that on the record?

I think what I find so appealing about that era is that music was so loose and free, but also really sophisticated. But they never shoved the sophistication in your face – it was just effortlessly cool and so musical.

The palate of tonal colours and flavours on this record is mind-blowing. There's bits of disco, funk, psychedelica, jazz, blues, rock 'n' roll… Was the intention to really cram in as much of that nostalgic influence as possible?

I don't know if the intention was to *cram it in*,as such, but yeah, I picked a sonic palate – Wurlitzer and background singers, sitars and acoustic guitars, electric guitars, and then clean, tight-sounding drums – and then really played into that, like, "Okay, 17 percent psychedelic, 15 percent *Talking Book*…"

So what's your philosophy in making that all come together without feeling it messy?

I definitely spent a lot of time sequencing this record. And I mean, I can tell you that I spent, like, two weeks making sure that there were the right amount of seconds and milliseconds in-between each song. So there's that, and then there's the process of going, "Okay, *this* is the story," y'know?

I have to quote *Rolling Stone* – I read a piece where they noted that in comparison to a lot of your other material, *Daddy's Home* "feels more human and lived-in". Especially given the subject matter that inspired it, did you want this record to embody a sense of homeliness, or feel very down-to-earth?

Yeah, I think I wanted to make something more grounded – more, like, from the guts. [*Clark looks up the definition of 'homeliness'*]… I promise I'm not being a dick – this is interesting! You used the term 'homeliness', and in North America, homely means, "A person who's unattractive in appearance". But in Britain – which is where your definition would've come from – it means, "Simple but cozy but comfortable, as in one's home". When you said 'homeliness', I was like, "Oh, okay. I've only heard that in a derogatory way."

Did you and Jack record this album with analogue equipment?

Oh, yeah! Definitely through good boards and preamps, vintage microphones and all that.

Is that typically how you tend to work?

Well, we've recorded through analogue gear into Pro Tools – so there was definitely a digital conversion at some point. But yeah, over the years I've built up a good setup of analogue gear in my studio, so it was very fun to make this record here. We did some at Electric Lady, too, which obviously has a lot of great things. We also did some at Conway, and then Jack did some at his studio, so there was a lot of great gear being passed around.

What was it like jamming out at Electric Lady?

Oh man, it's really fun! It's kind of one of the last great studios from that time [in the late '60s and '70s] – definitely in New York, at least. These days a lot of them are either Cheesecake Factories or condos for oligarchs. But [Electric Lady] just has such a good vibe – they take such good care of you, they have a lot of great gear, and it's a place I feel very comfortable in. Whenever I'm in New York, I like to rent it out just to be there.

Does it foster a sense of creativity that you don't get anywhere else?

Yeah, it does. Part of the creativity comes from biking or walking from my house to the studio, and just kind of getting to see *real life* happen around me.

What guitars were you rocking in the studio?

I think besides an acoustic that I borrowed from my friend, my Ernie Ball signature was the only guitar I played on the record. There was also… I want to say it was a '72 Coronado, which we played quite a bit for the bass. I love that guitar so much. And then there's a couple moments of acoustic that were done on these old, modded Kays that have piezo pickups in them. And I played a little bit of lap steel on this little new Supro guy that I have.

Are you much of a pedal-head these days?

I was a little bit less so for this record, because a lot of the tones on it are pretty direct-into-the-board kind of tones – just very clean. But I usually am. I got my Moogerfooger delay out again, and this Fulltone Distortion Pro which is quite nice.

A little bit later in the year, you'll be launching the Goldie version of your Ernie Ball sig. What can you tell us about how this one came about?

It's kind of an homage to a lot of the guitars I was playing early on in my career, which were these Harmony and Silvertone pawnshop guitars, or Seers- and road-bought guitars that had those gold foil pickups on them. And so the Goldie is more a guitar like that – kind of chimier, less output-heavy… They have a really pretty, kind of crystalline pickup sound. I'd say the original model definitely has more of a burly, thick, 'rock' sound, and this is a little more chime-y. But they're very different guitars – it's an 'and' instead of an 'or'.

THE POWER OF PUNK

IT KIND OF GOES WITHOUT SAYING THAT WE COULD ALL USE A BIT OF POSITIVITY RIGHT NOW. ENTER: THE TRAILBLAZING PUNK-ROCKERS IN **DROPKICK MURPHYS**, AND THEIR RAUCOUS NEW SET OF PARTY ANTHEMS, *TURN UP THAT DIAL.*

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **KEN SUSI**.

If there are two things we could all use right now, it's a tall beer and a turbulent mosh pit. Both go hand in hand with the Celtic punk cataclysm of the Dropkick Murphys, so it's a damn great sight to see them back and more boisterous than ever with their monolithic tenth album, *Turn Up That Dial*.

It's a markedly more cheerful effort from the Norfolk County sextet, for three distinct and calculated reasons: firstly, the band felt as though their last full-length, 2017's *11 Short Stories Of Pain & Glory*, was far too dismal – they needed to level out the field with some speaker-throttling party tunes; secondly, we've all just slogged through 18 months of a global pandemic – goddammit, we've earned that party; and thirdly, Don**d Tr**p was finally booted from the white house – an occasion we're pretty sure *legally requires* partying.

The record also saw the band embrace a new creative dynamic, with lead vocalist Al Barr splitting the frontman role with former bassist Ken Casey. Casey passed the four-string duties over to longtime collaborator Kevin Rheault, after a lifesaving spinal surgery in 2018 left him with permanently numb fingers. But don't worry, Casey lets us know he is far happier leaping around a stage without the fear of knocking someone's teeth out with a fretboard.

Casey also told us all about how *Turn Up That Dial* came to be one of the Murphys' most pivotal offerings to date, as you'll read below...

Before we go any further, we have to address something extremely serious: has Mick Jones responded to the inflammatory accusation that he nicked your pudding?

He hasn't, but we have concrete proof that he did as such, and we've rested our case already – the song's been written, it's out there, and we'll see if he decides to defend himself.

So thematically speaking, this record is steeped in an overwhelming sense of positivity – which I think feels especially poignant given the time and the world it's coming out in. Was that something you really wanted to take advantage of, to bring some light in a time of darkness?

100 percent. During the first lockdown, we really fell back in love with a lot of the music we listened to when we were younger. You don't usually have time as an adult to spin full records like you used to – and man, putting on those headphones and closing your eyes, and having the music take you away from where we've been at these last few years... We really wanted to make an effort to be able to do the same for whoever listens to this album – to let people feel like the party is about to get started again, and that everything is going to be alright.

What are some of the bands you were particularly influenced by, and wanted to sort of tip your hat to on this record?

I mean obviously, the biggest influence on this band is our affinity for late-'70s Britpunk – anything from The Clash to boybands like Cock Sparrer and The Business, Stiff Little Fingers... Everything from that era. We were also huge fans of American hardcore – but that heavier side of things didn't influence this record as much as that catchy, anthemic British punk-rock – obviously mixed with the Celtic twist that we give everything. In terms of what we listened to most during the pandemic, it was a lot of that classic punk-rock stuff.

As far as the recording process went, my understanding is that this is the first Dropkick album you didn't play the bass on.

Correct – which is why the bass sounds so good [*laughs*]. Kevin [Rheault] took over as our touring bass player when I was injured – I had to have neck surgery and couldn't play – and during my transition back to the stage, we just decided that he should stay in the group. Y'know, I was off the leash for the first time and I was able to get to the crowd.

When you're playing these bigger stages and you have two of us on the mic, it makes the show a lot more enjoyable – Al [Barr, co-lead vocals] could be on one side while I'm on the other, one guy is up where the whole audience can see him while the other guy is down at the barricade with the fans – it seemed to give the show another dynamic. And Kevin is just an old friend; he's worked for the band for 15 years, so we were like, "Man, we don't want to take this gig away from you – and I'm having a blast being able to connect more with the audience..." So we just decided we were better as a band all around having Kevin on bass. Plus we don't have to practise as much!

Is there anything unique he adds to the fold as a player?

I don't think we really put that pressure on him – we kind of had everything good to go. I mean, there's a little bit of his flavour on there. He's filled in for me on other occasions, like when I've had to fly home for a funeral mid-tour – he's filled in for everyone on guitar, he's filled in on banjo... He's like a savant, man, he can play everything! So y'know, he comes into the band like a band member, because he's already been on the stage with us so many times over the years. It wasn't like, "Hey, who's the new guy!?" So whatever Kevin might have added of his own, by volition, we know it's Dropkick Murphys. Because he gets us, y'know?

I was reading about how because of the social distancing requirements, you'd be recording with Ted [Hutt, producer] in shifts of two members at a time. What can you tell us about that process?

It's a little different, but I mean, we've been at it for so long that we're a good unit and we're professionals. Y'know, it's not like at this point, we're drinking beers at the studio and cheering each other on – we're there to get the work done. It's not the ideal way to make a record, for sure, but it worked just fine. We made it work. We were using digital technology and sharing files around constantly, anyway – any day that someone would put something down, we'd hear it that night.

We have full trust in Ted, but we also don't let someone just take the band into their own hands without us being a part of it. Ted is another guy who just gets us, and respects and enjoys that we're not looking for a guy to come in and do the work for us. Y'know, with the size of this band alone, it's a full-time job just getting everyone on the same page. I used to produce the records myself before Ted came along, and just from the bookkeeping side of it... *Oh my God!* It was like, "Okay, that's a wrap... Oh wait, shit, we forgot the guitars on that song! *The record is supposed to be mixed!*" Just to keep track of everything is a shitshow! But Ted just has the right head for it. That shit used to do me in, y'know? So God bless him – it takes a special kind of man to keep us on track like he does!

ONE IN A MILLION

WITH THEIR 2017 EFFORT, *A BLACK MILE TO THE SURFACE*, THE INDIE-ROCK LUMINARIES IN **MANCHESTER ORCHESTRA** PROVED THEY COULD PULL OFF A HIGH-STAKES CONCEPT ALBUM WITH STUNNING APLOMB. FOLLOWING IT UP FOUR YEARS LATER WITH *THE MILLION MASKS OF GOD*, THEY'VE AMPED UP THE INTENSITY TENFOLD WITH THEIR SHARPEST, BOLDEST AND MOST OPULENT EPIC YET.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **SHERVIN LAINEZ**.

Whether intentional or not, most albums are purpose-built for certain moods and backdrops – be it an emo record fitting for late-night existential crises under a fort of blankets, a hard-rock scorcher suited for blaring car stereos with the wind rippling through your hair, or a punk opus that offers some much-needed energy while you're shredding at the gym. In the case of the latest epic from Atlantan indie-rockers Manchester Orchestra, we'd recommend dimming the lights, sparking up some incense, sinking into your comfiest recliner and breaking out the good headphones, cranking that volume up to 11 and allowing *The Million Masks Of God* to drag you deep into its world.

A follow-up to 2017's Americana-flavoured *Black Mile To The Surface*, LP6 expands the broad, lofty palate of tones and tenacities that Manchester Orchestra have to play with. The guitars feel a tad more understated – and we know, that's likely not what you've come to read in a magazine all about guitars, but trust us when we say that less is undoubtedly more on *The Million Masks Of God*. The band use minimalism and sparseness to magnify the key elements of each track, making them all feel as grandiose and goosebump-inducing as possible.

In-between repeat listens of this labyrinthine masterpiece, *Australian Guitar* caught up with frontman Andy Hull to learn how *The Million Masks Of God* bloomed from the rubble of an untimely death.

One of the words I saw come up a lot in the *Black Mile* era, which will undoubtedly follow into this one, is 'cinematic'. And it's fitting because these are very cinematic records – very grand and opulent soundscapes with really complex storytelling. When you're hashing out the blueprint for a record like this, do you write it on the basis that it's meant to be heard as one cohesive body of work?

I think the idea is that, yes, we know it will be interpreted like that, but it's okay that the writing doesn't have to be that immediately. We're writing these from honesty and from real life experiences, and it's really more about collecting those than telling a narrative. It's like fishing, y'know, you spend your time out by the pond and you just keep throwing in your reel and hoping that something comes out.

The great part about having the band that I have, and the thinkers around us when we make a record, is that everyone buys in. That helps a lot. The idea for this record came pretty early on, but it was like we had only finished the edges of a 2,000-piece puzzle, and then we had to figure out the insides and how the whole thing connected together.

There's a quote from the press release that stuck out to me – that "where *Black Mile* was anchored by the journey of birth to death, *The Million Masks Of God* stands as a companion piece exploring what comes next." What made you want to continue down that rabbithole?

I think musically – and I'm guessing you would agree – it doesn't really sound like *Black Mile*; it's not that record. Conceptually, I suppose that's what the connection was – and I think the reason I'm going to keep diving down that rabbithole is because it's just sort of, like, the great existential question I'll always have now, being a parent.

And then being extremely close with my best friend Robert, who's father passed a short while ago – about half the record was written before his passing, and half of it was written after; and that was definitely a moment where I started to put together all the connections of what ending a life meant, I guess.

Black Mile was really focussed on going, "Man, what can I do as a dad?" And then this record turned into a musing on the fact that everyone has an expiration date – how do you deal with that emotion, and those you leave behind? It's all sorts of messy feelings, but that was the thing that gave us the inspiration to figure out how these things were all connected.

I think the guitar plays an interesting role on this album. It very much carries the record and is still the biggest element of your sound, but the mix isn't always built around it; sometimes the guitar sounds more ancillary, or used in the way a synth or a string part typically would.

I will say that a big part of letting go of being a rhythm player – as far as being a 'rock' guitarist goes – was having our bass player, Andy Prince, be a part of this album. He's essentially playing lead bass most of the time, which is just awesome. He's so beyond talented, and the connection between he and Tim [Very], our drummer, was a really, really important thing for the basis of what this album would become.

We wanted to leave the very first sessions for *Million Masks* with bass and drum tracks where, if you listened to those tracks on their own, it would be an enjoyable listen – you could still pop just the bass and drums on and go, "Yeah, this is some pretty good music." I was recognising how great those guys were and how collaborative they are on their sounds – and because of that, I felt less of a need to have that really chunky guitar stuff. Because that's what he's doing – you're hearing a dude playing a four-string bass that sounds like five guitars, so I didn't need to put five guitars on there anymore. And I like that stuff!

I've played enough rhythm guitar in my time, y'know? It's certainly important in moments, but it just felt good to step back. The two of them locked it down so much that Robert and I were able to just dream over it and think of all the ideas we could pop on top of their tracks.

Do you see elements of tone and tension as a way to convey emotions on their own accord?

I would certainly say that the way that we sequenced the album, we really wanted it to have the feeling of what a human life might feel like. So it's this sort of frantic birth, and then the angst and the feeling of... Y'know, life –figuring out what it is to be an adult human being. And knowing we were going for that – allowing the record to sort of lay the listener down – felt pretty poignant to us. So yeah, I think instrumentally and conceptually, everything was tied together. It was cool to try something different in that sense.

Do you see an importance in experimentation?

Yeah, I think that's wildly important. The term 'experimentation' often gets a bad rap because it sounds like a bunch of people banging pots and pans together and seeing if it sounds cool... And it actually kind of *is* that, y'know?

Ethan Guska, one of the producers on the record – he was there from day one of the recording, right 'til the end, and we were finishing the record in his studio in LA; he would kick a Coke can by accident, and then turn to us and go, "Woah, did you hear that!?" And you're sort of told that that's nerdy and not cool – but it is cool! If you can use those sounds to create big ideas and things you'd never otherwise think of... That stuff is awesome.

Y'know, something Catherine [Marks, producer] would say a lot during *Black Mile*, and also during this record, was, "Just don't plan on ending it. If a song ends and you feel like you have more to do, do more." And that feeling of just being like, "Man, we can kind of do whatever we want," at that very vulnerable initial stage where it's just four guys standing in a room, looking at each other and being recorded... Yeah, that made a huge difference.

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RISE AND SHINE

AFTER WHAT FEELS LIKE THE LONGEST TWO YEARS IN HISTORY, **DZ DEATHRAYS** BRING THEIR *POSITIVE RISING* ERA TO AN EXPLOSIVE PEAK, DELIVERING RIFFS APLENTY ON A TIGHT AND TURBULENT NEW LONG-PLAYER.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. LIVE PHOTO BY **DAVID HERINGTON** / PRESS PHOTO BY **YASMIN SUTEJA**.

Though its bulk was penned in the early months of 2019, *Positive Rising Part 2* – album #6 from the dance-punk debonairs in DZ Deathrays, and, as its title suggests, the second half of their monstrous *Positive Rising* project – feels distinctly suited for the mid-pandemic slog of 2021.

It's the yang to *Part 1*'s yin, darker and stormier with heavier riffs, deeper grooves and an amplified wallop of frontman Shane Parsons' wry, acerbic wit. Especially given DZ's bout of quiet preceding it (which was forced by the COVID outbreak of 2020 – the initial plan was to jump straight from disc to disc), *Part 2* marks a belting snap back to the spotlight for the Brisbane trio.

But like a lot of what's made DZ Deathrays such an impenetrable force on Australia's rock and punk scene, *Positive Rising* had a notably lowkey origin story – the band didn't set out to create some towering, generational concept album epic; many of the songs came together on a whim, with Parsons, co-shredder Lachlan Ewbank and snarelord Simon Ridley embracing their naturally loose and luminescent character, rather than forcing themselves to be something they aren't.

Ahead of the album's release this July, we caught up with Parsons and Ewbank to riff on the way *Positive Rising Part 2* takes DZ Deathrays to a whole new level – and, excitingly, what to look forward to from album no. seven (which looks set to come much sooner than later).

Was there a creative intent behind the decision to work on each part of *Positive Rising* separately?

Shane: It was essentially just that those songs [on *Positive Rising Part 1*] were finished first, and then these ones all needed a little bit more love. We started the process going, "Alright, these are the 20 songs that are going to make up this album," and the nine on *Part 1* were just the first nine that we had ready to go. We recorded them with out friend Miro [Mackie] in LA – he lives out there, and we'd always wanted to do the whole self-indulgent 'go to LA and make a record' kind of thing. So we did *Part 1* there, and then we ended up going back to The Grove in Sydney for *Part 2*, because it's just such a great studio, they have a lot of great gear and a really nice vibe.

It's kind of funny though, because I feel like the first part is a lot more indie-punk, and then the second one has a lot more of that big, rock 'n' roll kind of stuff – it's almost like the record opens up as you get further and further into it. So yeah, there are definitely some tonal differences, but I think if you listen to the two records back to back, it should all work together quite well. It was all recorded and mixed by the same engineer, too. It was funny: we spent so much time on *Part 1* just getting the mix right, but when it came to *Part 2*, he mixed it once and we were all like, "Man, that's practically spot on!"

***Part 2* feels a little moodier and a little more intense. Where did that darkness come from?**

Shane: I think that comes down to the crossover between Lachlan and I. Lachlan writes a lot of stuff in minor and I write a lot in major, so between the two of us you get this kind of alternating mood. I think it's great, because it sort of f***s with your head a little bit. I know The Strokes do it really well where the mood is upbeat but it sounds pretty

downbeat, and that sort of feeling is really interesting. It's a cool dynamic.

In terms of guitars, this record just absolutely f*ing rips. What made you want to really crank up the riffs for *Part 2?***

Shane: It definitely just happened organically. "Swept Up" was a demo I had that was super rough, and in the studio we were like, "Should we listen to it again?" But we decided that it kind of had a good vibe – it was really quite different and fit into that bluesier, darker world we were going for, so a lot of the shit in that song was all written on the spot.

The first solo I played for that track, I don't actually know how to play it. I just played *something* and went, "Oh, that sounds good!" And then Lachy got on the slide guitar to give it that kind of woozy, blues-country feel. And then with those space-y sort synths underneath it, to me, it's one of the most interesting songs on the record. Because there was no real thought going into it – we were like, "Ah, let's just throw things at it and see what happens."

It's always just about whatever works. With "Make Yourself Mad", for instance, we wrote that riff *so* long ago – just after we finished Bloody Lovely, we had a writing session in Yass and it was one of the first songs we wrote as a three-piece. And back then, I think we just had a riff; we didn't have a melody or any sort of vocal ideas, and it took so many years for us to get it to that point. I was just staying at an Airbnb with some friends on the Gold Coast, I had an acoustic guitar with me and I wrote the chorus there, just because I had some time to kill and I was feeling a little bit inspired.

And then "Riff City" – y'know, that's just a jam. We really wanted to give those sorts of songs a bit more time to shine on the record, rather than focus completely on just chords or single-note stuff. [*Positive Rising Part 1*] feels a lot more like that driving, straight rock sort of stuff, and then this one has a lot more of those groove-oriented riffs.

"Golden Retriever" seems like a good example of that. That track is groovy as hell.

Shane: That's a funny one! That's another latecomer to the record – I was working on some demos with Al Grigg from Palms, and when I got to his house he was like, "Oh shit, I left my guitar at Owen's place, let me see if he's home and I'll go pick it up." So I was just at his house by myself, and he had a really nice acoustic, and I wrote that song in like ten minutes, there, on that guitar. And I was like, "Oh shit, I better record this on my phone!" And then all I did was tweak the chorus a couple of weeks later. So that was another one of those really last-minute things that we just went with. It was a fun one!

It's all about going with the flow!

Shane: Totally. I think we spend so much time getting caught up on certain songs – and I hope it's paid off, but I feel like whenever you get the chance to just sort of open yourself up, play whatever comes to mind and just be like, "Ah, that sounds great," it's really special. We've definitely overthought songs in the past, and sometimes the best ones are the ones that just come naturally.

Lachlan: That's kind of like with "All Or Nothing", all the different versions you tried to do, and then we ended up sticking with the original. You've gotta just believe in yourself!

Shane: I know! But then you get a lot of cooks in the kitchen when you have a producer and a label, and all of those different voices chiming in. Because y'know, with "All Or Nothing", everyone was like, "It sounds like two different songs." And I was like, "Well, it kind of is." There's a key change between the verse and the chorus, and in the end that just made it flow a lot better. But I re-wrote that song maybe six times in different keys, trying to get the chorus and the verse to sit closer together. But in the end, it didn't have the same feeling or the same sort of weird 'switching gears' kind of thing. I am glad we kept it the way it was originally.

When that chorus kicks in, it's just like, "Oh shit!" It takes you to a totally different musical atmosphere.

Shane: Yeah, totally! That's what I love about it. It's like tension and release: you're holding onto this F# for *ages* in the verses, and then it slides up to a D – which is kind of unusual, but it *works*. At the start, Miro was pushing me to make the verses and the chorus level out, but in the end he was like, "Y'know what? Maybe you're right. If it sounds cool to you, just do it." And to me, it's a fun song. We played it live the other week, and it was just so great to play!

What did the gear arsenal look like for these recording sessions?

Lachlan: We were very lucky, we used a very old Les Paul that we borrowed from Murray Cook, which was incredible. It's all over the record – all of my solos were done on that. And then I've got an Ed O'Brien Strat, which is my go-to guitar for pretty much everything.

Shane: I used my Powercaster for everything in Drop D, and then I used Lachy's Strat for a lot of the chordal stuff as well. The humbucker I use on my Powercaster is awesome for that real hard, blocky sound, but if you want a bit more definition, it can get a bit mushy sounding. So the mini humbucker on that Strat worked really well for those parts, and then for anything in Drop C or CADGBE, we had the Stratocaster I play live with set up for that tuning. It has a 58 on the low C, and then I think a 13 on the E, and then it has this crazy stripped G that's like a piano wire. And there's a bit of acoustic guitar on there, too.

Lachlan: Oh, the Gibson! There was a real old one at the studio, which was really nice.

Shane: We used that on "Swept Up", you can kind of hear it padding out the back – which was really nice to do. It was really nice to learn how to play an acoustic again. It's so rhythmic, and it's actually a lot harder to play than you'd expect. You've really gotta work on your strumming pattern to make sure it locks into the kit and everything.

Do you see yourself doing more of that rhythmic, bluesy acoustic stuff in the future?

Shane: Well on the next record [after *Positive Rising Part 2*], there's a track that's pretty much all acoustic, except for the chorus. I've always wanted to do an acoustic DZ song – it's still heavy, but I wanted to lean into that Beck-esque sort of world. I love the acoustic guitar – one of the most fun things you can do is put an acoustic through a distortion pedal. It actually sounds amazing.

What else can you tell us about DZ LP #6?

Lachlan: There's a bit more attitude, I reckon!

Shane: Yeah. It's actually quite upbeat and positive. I think we wrote a bunch of songs that were a bit sad when lockdown first started, and I was just like, "Y'know what? People don't want to be reminded of this time." Writing about that kind of stuff really puts a timestamp on it, so I was like, "Nah, f*** this. Let's write for the future, when people are allowed to do whatever they want again – when they can go to a bar and jump on top of each other, share each other's drinks…" I feel like whatever the next record is, it's shaping up to feel a bit like *Bloody Lovely* in some ways. But maybe a bit more punk? Yeah, it'll be interesting…

WEEZER'S
AGE OF RECKLESSNESS

AS THEY INCH EVERMORE CLOSER TO THEIR THIRD DECADE OF POP-ROCK PREDOMINANCE, RIVERS CUOMO AND CO. HAVE SET AN AMBITIOUS COURSE TO WEEZ WHERE WEEZER HAVE NEVER WEEZED BEFORE.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTOS BY **SEAN MURPHY**.

ON THE ONE END,

we've got an ambitious, high-concept epic of anxiety and introspection à la big, brooding orchestral soundscapes. And on the other, we've got a balls-to-the-wall half-hour of thick 'n' fast, '80s-flavoured hair metal riffage. And that's just Weezer's 2021 slate: next year, they're doling us a King Gizzard-style four-album saga with everything from acoustic ballads to dancefloor anthems.

The world is ending, after all: why not live out all your wildest, Weeziest dreams?

It stands to reason that, as one of the bands that helped pioneer and define it, Weezer are synonymous with the boom of bubbly and buoyant, ultra-melodic pop-rock of the late '90s and early 2000s. But while that's where the Californian quartet's mainstream esteem may have peaked, it's undoubtedly today that Weezer's flame burns the brightest.

Since roaring back to life from their second hiatus with 2014's ripping and rousing *Everythingt Will Be Alright In The End* (on which they treated old-school fans to an onslaught of booming hooks and earwormish choruses), they've struck gold with everything from doughy '60s-revering surf-rock (on 2016's *White Album*) to polarising avant-garde pop (on 2019's *Black Album*) and even tongue-in-cheek covers of yesteryear's cheesiest FM hits (on 2019's *Teal Album*).

But as they near 30 years of their reign as the rightful kings of pop-rock, it's become crystal clear that Weezer have, until now, only scratched the surface of their powerful and polychromatic potential. Even for a band as unpredictably quirky as them, nobody could have foreseen Weezer's 2021 output: an introspective, orchestral-backed album of ballads and Broadway-esque showtunes, and a slamming, shred-heavy bombshell of '80s hair metal-channeling rock anthems – the admirable efforts of a band that is truly unhinged.

And then there's Weezer's 2022 slate – because if two career-defining, critic-stunning albums isn't enough for one year, how about four? Starting shape as a mental exercise to keep frontman Rivers Cuomo sane as he trod along through last year's pandemic-incited lockdown, the *Seasons* saga quickly blossomed into an ambitious four-disc epic, taking Weezer to a quadrant of very distinct, individually inspired corners of their musicality.

This is Weezer's age of recklessness: they're doing what *they* want to do, living their wildest musical dreams and embracing the most whimsical corners of their imaginations – all with absolute creative authority. As he gears up for one of the biggest and busiest chapters of the Weezer story, we caught up with Rivers to vibe on *Van Weezer* and *OK Human*, what we can all look forward to from the *Seasons* project, and everything else going on with one of rock's most idiosyncratic characters.

We're only halfway through 2021, and it's already been one of the biggest years in Weezer's history. What's the vibe like on your end?

Well, I just get so absorbed in whatever I'm doing that I kind of forget about everything else. So I could answer a lot of about the *Fall* album right now… I'm probably going to struggle on *Van Weezer* [*laughs*]. It doesn't exactly feel hectic, but there's just so much material – thank goodness for modern technology and spreadsheets. I don't know how people did it before they had technology to help them keep track of everything.

> "I DON'T CARE WHEN SOMETHING WAS WRITTEN OR WHAT IT'S FROM, I JUST WANT THE BEST POSSIBLE BITS."

Some of the stuff on *Van Weezer* goes back to the days before this band even existed, right?

Yeah. I don't care when something was written or what it's from, I just want the best possible bits; I just want to put it all together and make a great song. It doesn't matter where any of it came from. I'm pretty agnostic about that stuff – a lot of times, I forget when something was even written. I just go searching through my Dropbox folders and go, "Okay, I need a great verse, give me a great verse… Okay, here's a great verse!" And I'll get to a point where I realise, "Oh wait, that was from, like, 25 years ago!"

What's the method to the madness when it comes to how you save, collate and draw from your stable of ideas?

Ultimately it's just what feels right, but I do have tools that help me narrow down the field. I just made this really cool app called Demolisher – it's this big panel with all these switches I can flip, and it'll search through all my thousands of demos to give me exactly what I'm looking for. Depending on which switches are flipped, it will give me, like, only choruses that start on the one chord in major key, between 120 and 130 beats per minute, and that are a particular genre – and then I'll be faced with ten options instead of 1,000. And then it's just a matter of trying them all out and seeing which ones feel the best for a song.

And you developed the app yourself?

Yeah! I love all of that stuff! That's half the fun right there. I got into computer programming in 2015, and I spend hours on it every day. I just love it. But even before that I had spreadsheets, and before spreadsheets there were notebooks and graph paper. I'm just always trying to keep track of everything.

How many albums worth of viable song ideas would you say you have?

I don't know… I guess the time-consuming part is putting them all together, that would be the limiting factor to figuring that out. There's a lot of pieces in there. Obviously I have my phone with me wherever I go, and several times a day an idea will pop into my head and I'll record it in a note, and then it automatically gets uploaded to Dropbox, and then there are scripts that go in there and analyse tempo and put other tags on it, and then it's easy to filter and sort.

I like that you'll sometimes use the fans as a sounding board, like via your forum Mr. Rivers' Neighbourhood.

Yeah, it's really great! I just love their tastes so much – they're so similar to my own tastes, and they share a lot of my core values. So sometimes when I'm working on something, if I've gotten distracted or confused by other forces around me, I can see what the fans' reactions will be and go, "Oh yeah, that's what I like!" [*Laughs*].

Let's riff on *Van Weezer* – pun intended. Where did the idea for this record come from? Have you always had a soft spot for '80s hair metal?

Yeah! I mean, that's what I grew up on. I never would've called it 'hair metal' at the time, though, it was just metal – heavy metal. That's what real music was to me when I was a teenager. That's how I learned to play my instrument, by learning how to play heavy metal songs. But right around the time Weezer got together, just about all the musicians in LA did an about face – we all went from being metalheads to alternative guys, so we changed our guitar sound, we cut our hair, and we made our first album. But all those heavy metal instincts are still in there, in our souls and in our fingers, and they've just been waiting to come out all these years.

So why was now the right point in time for that to happen? I know the initial rollout plan was very closely tied to the *Hella Mega Tour* – was it a bit of a 'chicken and egg' scenario?

Yeah, that's exactly right. We actually were working on *OK Human* first, and we'd mostly finished working on that, but just as we were wrapping that one up our manager called and said, "You guys got booked on the Hella Mega Tour with Green Day and Fall Out Boy. It's going to be Monsters Of Rock all over again, you're going to be shredding stadiums all around the world." And we were like, "Uh oh! We just made this introspective singer-songwriter album with pianos and an orchestra!" That's like the worst kind of album you could put out before a tour like that. So we put *OK Human* on the shelf and said, "Alright, I guess it's time to unleash the beast!" Because y'know, if we're going to go out every night and have to compete with Green Day, we've gotta bring some serious rock riffage.

I read on a forum that *Van Weezer* went through some changes after it got delayed. Is there any truth to that?

I guess the change was just that as we were finishing up on *Van Weezer*, the Hella Mega Tour got postponed because of the whole lockdown situation, and we realised that *Van Weezer* was the worst type of album we could put out during a quarantine. We couldn't even be in the same room together, let alone go out and promote a rock album. So we put *Van Weezer* on the shelf and focussed our attention back on *OK Human*. I don't remember going back and making any significant changes to *Van Weezer*, though – do you remember what you heard?

I think the big thing was that some of the tracklisting got changed around.

Yeah, I mean, I'm gonna tweak up until... Well, even 'til after the album is on shelves. But it was nothing major – taking an old song off, putting a new song on, that kind of thing.

Do you think there's potential for *Van Weezer* to not just be a one-and-done sort of concept?

Yeah. I mean, we're very responsive to the people in front of us every night when we're playing. We want to get that applause, so whatever people are responding to, that's what we're going to gravitate towards.

What guitars were you jamming on in the studio for this record?

Well the album is called *Van Weezer*, so obviously everyone is going to focus on the 'Van' part when we're talking about it – because that's the new thing, that's the interesting thing – but really, half of it is still classic Weezer. So in the spirit of that first part, I did try out a couple of crazy '80s guitars, but it seemed to be overdoing the schtick a little bit. So I just ended up going back to the same guitar I've always used, since the *Blue Album*, which was Ric Ocasek's late-'50s Les Paul Special. That's the meat of the record right there.

What is it about that LP Special that's made it your ride-or-die?

Well, I never use it at a show, because it's actually kind of delicate. But something about my right hand and my pick crunching into those strings, on that guitar with that pickup, jamming a powerchord through an overdriven amp... It just sounds like *music*. It's an unmistakable sound. It's thick, but it's punchy at the same time.

Are you much of a pedal-head as well?

Not at all. In fact, going back to our first album, I don't think there's a single effect on anything. Sometimes people will go, "Oh, we're doing 'The Sweater Song', it's got that cool, clean riff – let's put a flanger on it, let's put some chorus, let's do this and that..." But it's like, no, you don't need *any* of that. It's already built into the riff, just play the riff!

Do you find that going straight into an amp helps you capture that raw, authentic Weezer energy?

Yeah. The spirit is in the notes. It's not so much about the sound of them, I just want to get the notes across to the listener's ears.

Which I suppose is how *OK Human* works so well as a Weezer album despite there not being a single riff on it. Where did the idea for that record come from?

The idea originally came from the producer, Jake Sinclair. I went over to his house one day, and I wasn't expecting to start a project – I was going over to say hi, but he said, "Oh, I've got an idea for your next album. You should do something like *Nilsson Sings Newman*, this obscure album from the early '70s." He gave me a copy of it and said, "The jist of this is you sitting down at a piano – no guitars – and write totally personal, non-commercial, weird, quirky, Rivers/Weezer songs; then we'll back you up with a full orchestra instead of distorted guitars." And I was like, "Woah, that sounds like a lot of fun!" I wasn't used to writing on a piano, so it was a real new experience for me.

Did that songwriting process take you very far out of your comfort zone?

It was pretty darn comfortable, actually. It was incredibly fun! I love classical music, I love Beethoven and Bach and all of that stuff. I'm a total amateur, but I love trying to explore that side of music composition. So I wouldn't say I was creatively out of my comfort zone at all – but technically speaking, for sure. I had to practise quite a bit. We recently played a concert with the LA Philharmonic Orchestra at Disney Hall, and I practised for three weeks straight – every single day, practise, practise, practise – so I wouldn't make a fool out of myself in front of these amazing musicians.

What was it like working with an orchestra for the record?

Sadly, I had no contact with them. Because y'know, mid-pandemic and all, if you're not absolutely required to be there, you can't be there. But I would pop in on Zoom and check it out, and it was an incredible thrill. I'd never heard my music played by an orchestra before, and I was just blown away. I had a lot of the basic ideas for their arrangements, but I had just pumped them out on a piano. To hear them all played back by a full orchestra... It's such a thrill.

The lyrical themes on *OK Human* feel so timely. Did the concept for the record grow as it came together?

Yeah. There actually wasn't an intended concept to

begin with – it was more just like, "Write whatever you're going through on any given day. Just whatever happens to be troubling you. And don't write for anybody else." So that's just what I did, so I guess it ends up sounding a bit like a day in the life of Rivers in the middle of a pandemic.

Do you think there's potential for an *OK Human* tour with an orchestra behind you?

I sure would love to do an orchestral tour! But it seems so incredibly expensive – there's just no way we could pull it off, unfortunately. But hopefully we'll come up with *something*. At the bare minimum, maybe just a few special concerts like the one we just did at Disney Hall. Maybe we could do one in Sydney at the Opera House. That would be amazing!

Have you thought about how some of the back catalogue might translate to an orchestral setting?

At the concert we just did, we did *OK Human* in full and an additional six songs, and we got the same arranger and conductor to rework those songs for the orchestra. I played an acoustic guitar and Pat [Wilson] was still on the drums, but it was basically like *OK Human* versions of classic Weezer songs... And a Toto song [*laughs*]. I haven't heard the concert back yet, but to be standing in the midst of an orchestra, hearing "Island In The Sun"... It was so beautiful.

Speaking of what you've got coming up in the pipeline, are there any plans to celebrate the 25th anniversary of *Pinkerton* this year?

It hasn't been discussed – not yet, at least. I did recently uncover a song from 1995 which was written right around the same time as "El Scorcho". It's a song I never demoed – I never recorded it, but I had it written down, and I only just recently made a demo of it. Right now it's slated to come out on the *Winter* album in December of 2022, but maybe we could put it out later this year as a little gift for the fans in celebration of *Pinkerton's* anniversary. And maybe we'll do some *Pinkerton* shows later in the year – it's all up to the pandemic.

When I was growing up, my exposure to Weezer was through songs like "Island In The Sun", "Buddy Holly", "Beverly Hills" – those really catchy, or for lack of a better word, *safe* kind of songs. So when I got around to hearing *Pinkerton*, it was so unexpectedly rough and angsty – and evidently it was the same for people in '99, hot on the heels of the *Blue Album*. Was that part of the intention, to really dismantle what people knew of and expected from Weezer?

I don't think we intended to be unsuccessful [*laughs*]. I think we all thought it was going to be a huge record, honestly. But like a lot of the other bands around that time, we were a little uncomfortable with the sound of our first record. That's not exactly who we were when we were playing in the clubs. We were much rougher and more aggressive – we weren't meant to be this polished, major label alt-rock band. So we kind of swung back the other way and produced the next record ourselves, and that was a lot more true to what we thought Weezer was supposed to be.

> **"LIKE A LOT OF THE OTHER BANDS AROUND THAT TIME, WE WERE A LITTLE UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE SOUND OF OUR FIRST ALBUM..."**

You've done that a few times since throughout the Weezer timeline, to varying degrees of success – whether that's making a pop record like *Raditude* or going really experimental on the *Black Album*, or working with a 38-piece orchestra on *OK Human*. Do you see a value in subverting fan expectations every so often?

Not really. It's basically me just wanting to try something – I just get excited to try new things. I'm not really thinking about how the fans are going to react.

There's not a balance you have to strike between passion projects like *OK Human* and fan-service projects like *Everything Will Be Alright In The End?*

Everything Will Be Alright In The End was definitely a case of us saying, "Hey, what if we made an album just for the straight-up hardcore fans?" But I guess as the years go by, nothing seems to really matter anymore. We can do whatever we want, and it doesn't really change the course of this giant ship that is Weezer – it's just going to sail on into the distance.

I think Weezer is one of the few bands that can truly do whatever the f* it wants and get away with it, because that's just the core ethos of Weezer.**

I mean, it's not like that for other bands?

To a degree? Most bands don't have fanbases that expect the unexpected in the way your average Weezer fan would.

Sure. I guess AC/DC is the big counter example, right? You pretty much know exactly what you're going to get from a new AC/DC album. It would be really trippy if they just totally changed it up and dropped a pop album.

Imagine if AC/DC did a record like *OK Human*.

I mean, I'd check it out! An introspective piano-orchestral album with their style of vocals on top? That would be wild.

What can you tell us about the *Seasons* project you're working on right now?

I actually just finished doing some stuff for the *Fall* album. There are four albums in the series, and each one is based on the season its named after. Each record has a predominant emotion that I have in mind as I'm writing. *Spring* is on the happy, chill side, and *Summer* is indignant, youthful rebellion. *Fall* would be anxiety, and then *Winter* is sadness and loss. In terms of the sound, *Spring* is kind of like "Island In The Sun", and *Summer* is kind of like a crunchy Beach Boys – I guess a bit like the *Blue Album*. *Fall* is the most risky direction of all — that's going to be dance-rock, like Franz Ferdinand. And then *Winter* is all '90s singer-songwriter, a bit like Elliot Smith.

So will that be the next project to surface after *Van Weezer*?

It'll start on the first day of Spring 2022, when the first album comes out. I'm excited for people to hear it!

Is all your creative energy focussed on *Seasons*, or are you still tinkering away on other bits and pieces?

I have a few other projects which are just starting to pick up steam, but they involve other collaborators and forms of media, so it's a very slow process – I'm just waiting for my role to kick in. So I've given myself this four-album project to tide me over. There's some kind of musical drama that I'm working on at the moment called *Buddha Superstar*. I don't know if it's going to be a Broadway show or a movie, but apparently that's going to be, like, a five-year process.

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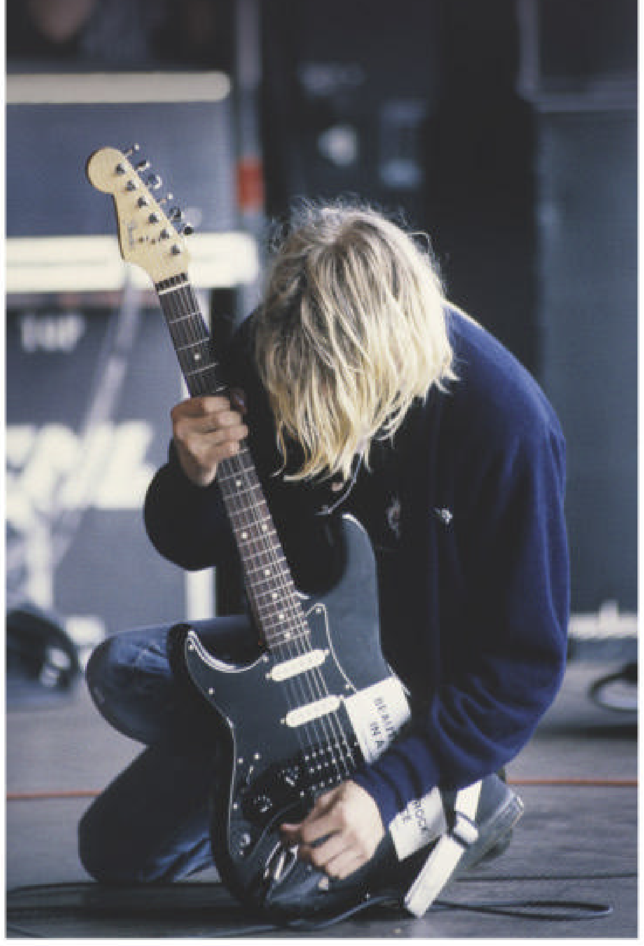
FUTURE

NIRVANA "LITHIUM"

Take a look at Kurt Cobain's powerchord-fuelled anthem for the dispossessed.



Seemingly written through the eyes of a character, "Lithium" is a song that evolved lyrically to reflect Cobain's own dark feelings. It was "some of my personal experiences, like breaking up with girlfriends and having bad relationships, feeling that death void that the person in the song is feeling – very lonely, sick," the frontman related to *Musician* magazine.

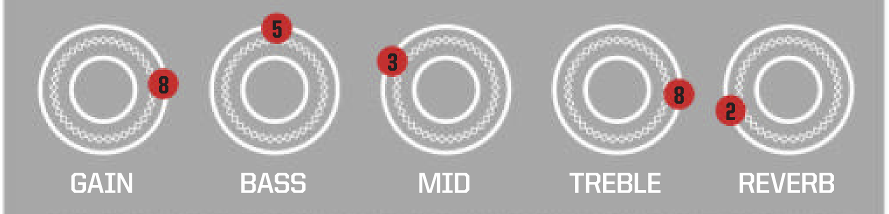
If its subject matter is bleak and morose, it's contrasted and lifted by an ironic, celebratory pop chorus. Instrumentally, a knowing light and shade approach was becoming a calling card of Cobain's songwriting on Nevermind. The structure of "Lithium" is an example of the influential quiet/loud dynamic Nirvana were spearheading, and it can also be heard on fellow singles "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and "In Bloom".

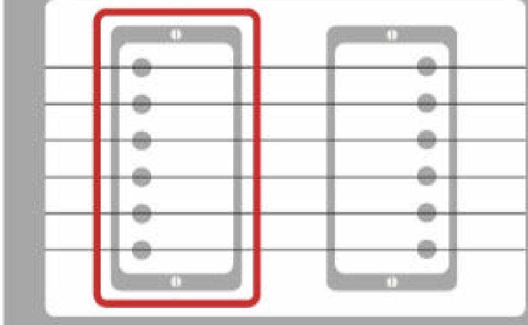
What all three songs share, then, is the requirement for two guitar tones: clean and distortion. That means you'll need either a two-channel amp or a distortion pedal.

GET THE SOUND Everything you need to know before playing 'Lithium'

GET THE TONE

CHANNEL DISTORTION





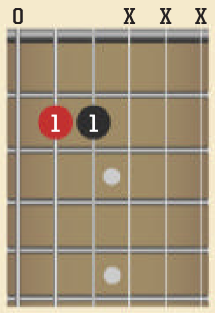
Use a bridge-position humbucker throughout or switch between neck and bridge pickups if your guitar's equipped with single-coils.

EFFECTS
Distortion
Level: 5
Tone: 4
Drive: 8

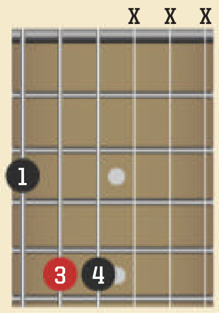
Kurt began the "Lithium" sessions with a Fender Stratocaster, before smashing it when the session broke down into "Endless, Nameless". The intro and verse sections sound best played with a neck-position single-coil or a warm sounding bridge humbucker, with your amp set to a clean sound. The original guitar tracks were recorded through a Fender Bassman, and "Lithium" is the only track on *Nevermind* that uses an Electro-Harmonix Big Muff. To replicate the thick layers of distortion, we'd suggest switching channels on your amp or using a dedicated drive pedal. Just make sure to switch on the distortion at the right time (on the B chord) to coincide with the drum fills leading into the chorus.

CHORDS

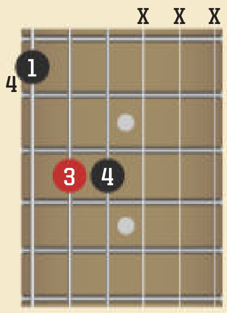
All the chords that end in a '5' are powerchords. These are simpler versions of harder-to-play barre chords. Compare the A, B and D barre chords with the powerchord voicings and you'll notice that they share a number of notes – this gives you a clue as to which fingers to use. Aside from the A, you can play all these chords using just your first and third fingers if you prefer not to use your fourth finger.



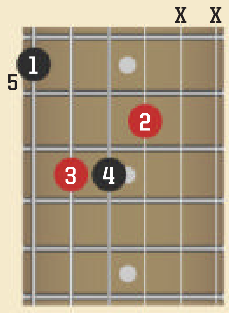
E5



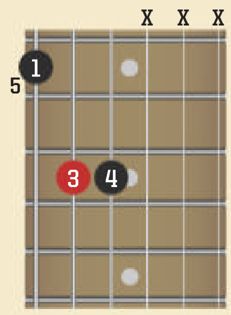
G5



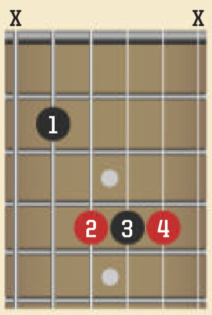
G#5



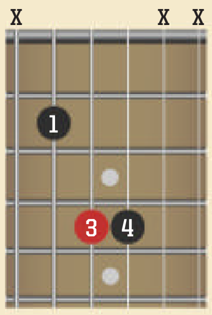
A



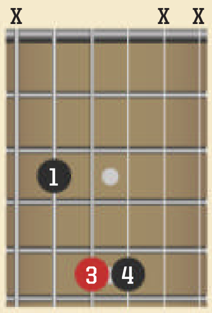
A5



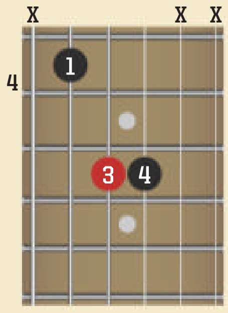
B



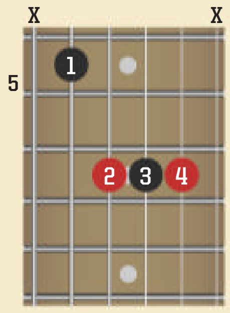
B5



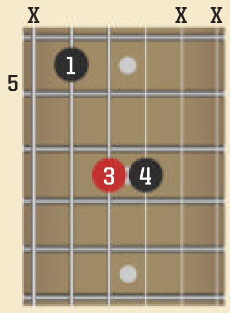
C5



C#5



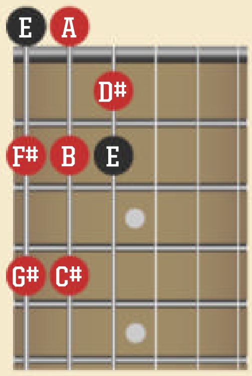
D



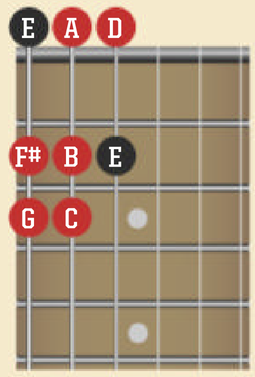
D5

SCALES

There's no solo or scale-based playing in "Lithium", but Kurt's songwriting magic is exposed if you compare the notes in the chords to those of the song's key – the E major scale (E F# G# A B C# D#). If you use only the notes from E major you can expect a safe, stable ordinary sound. G5, C5, D and D5 all include 'outside' notes – from E minor (E F# G A B C D) it turns out. Switching between two keys is something you can try out in your own songs.



E major scale



E natural minor scale

NIRVANA
“LITHIUM”

“LITHIUM”
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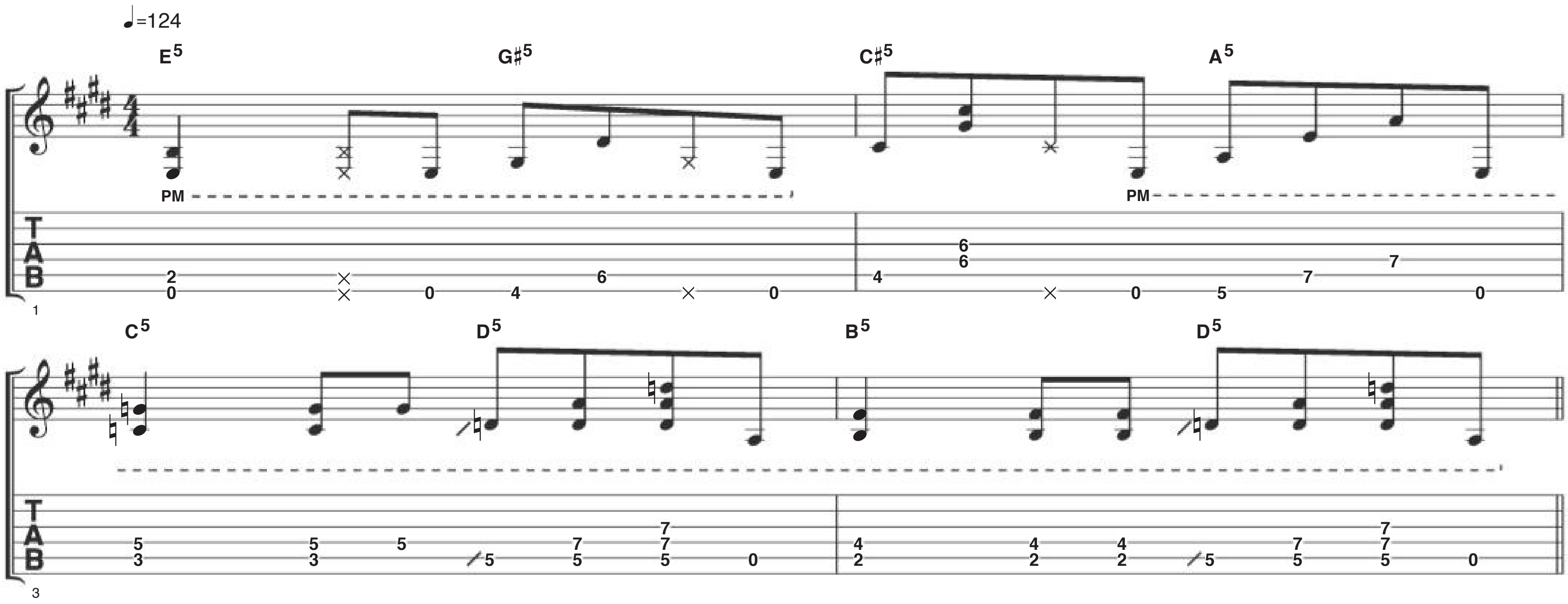
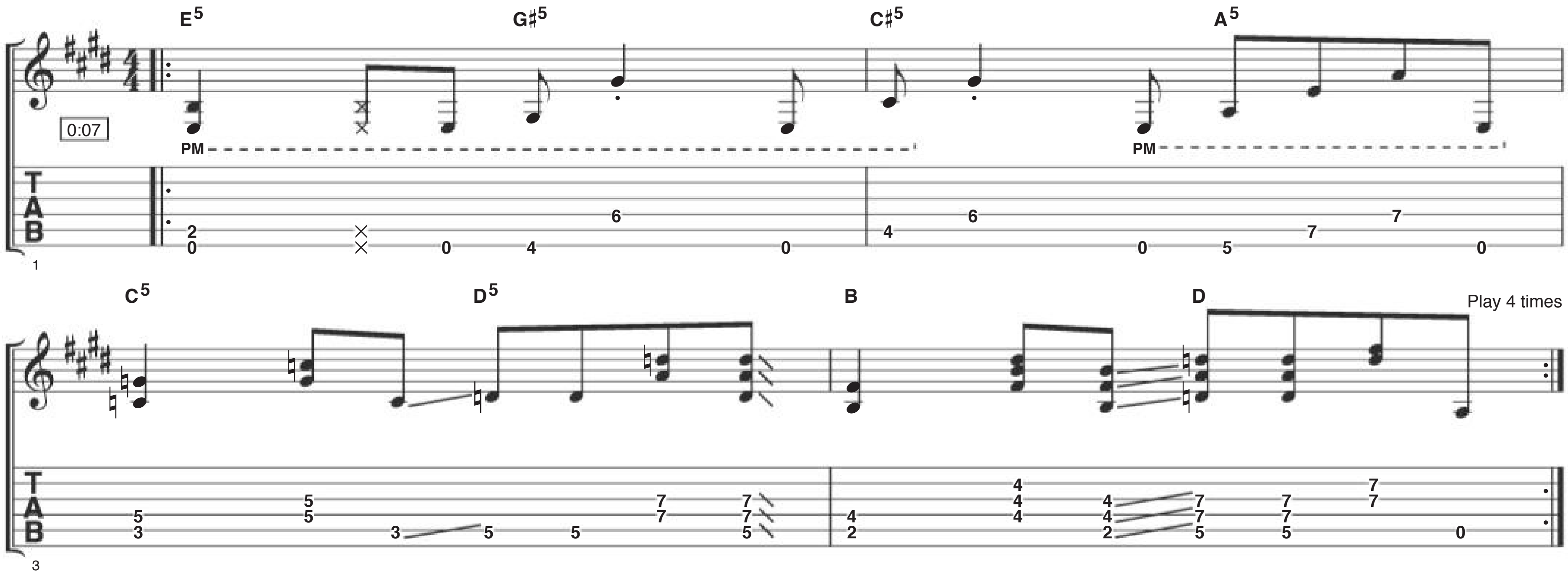
NIRVANA - “LITHIUM” / Intro



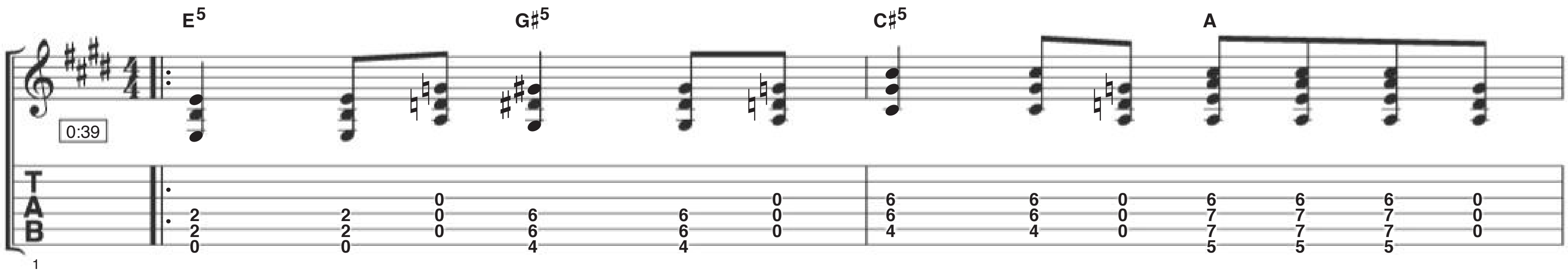
Fret these powerchords with your first and third fingers – except the initial E5, which you should fret with your first finger only. Use alternate picking in Bars #1 and #2, but downstrokes in Bars #3 and #4. Bounce the side of your hand on the strings as you pick to palm-mute the strings.

NIRVANA - “LITHIUM” / Verse #1



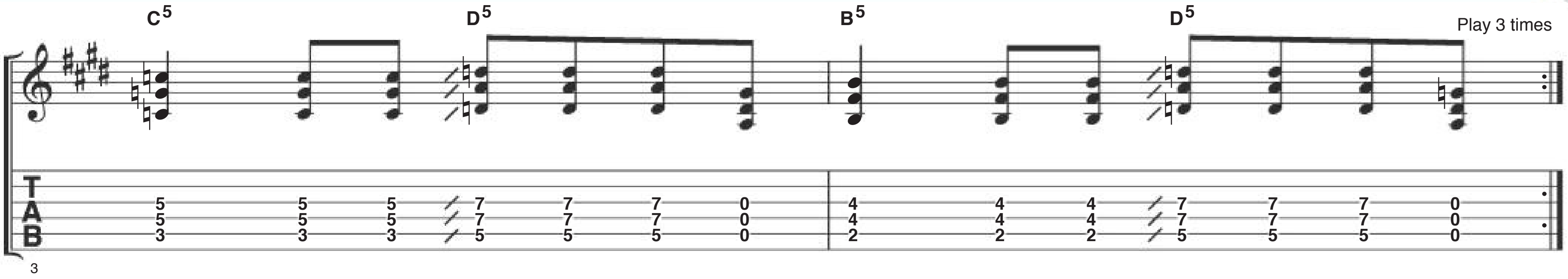
Verse #1 is a slight variation on the intro part. The chords and rhythm are essentially the same, although you will need to fret full B and D chords in Bar #4 instead of powerchords. We've tabbed the part accurately here, but it's more important to maintain the groove than to slavishly copy the exact notes.

NIRVANA - “LITHIUM” / Chorus



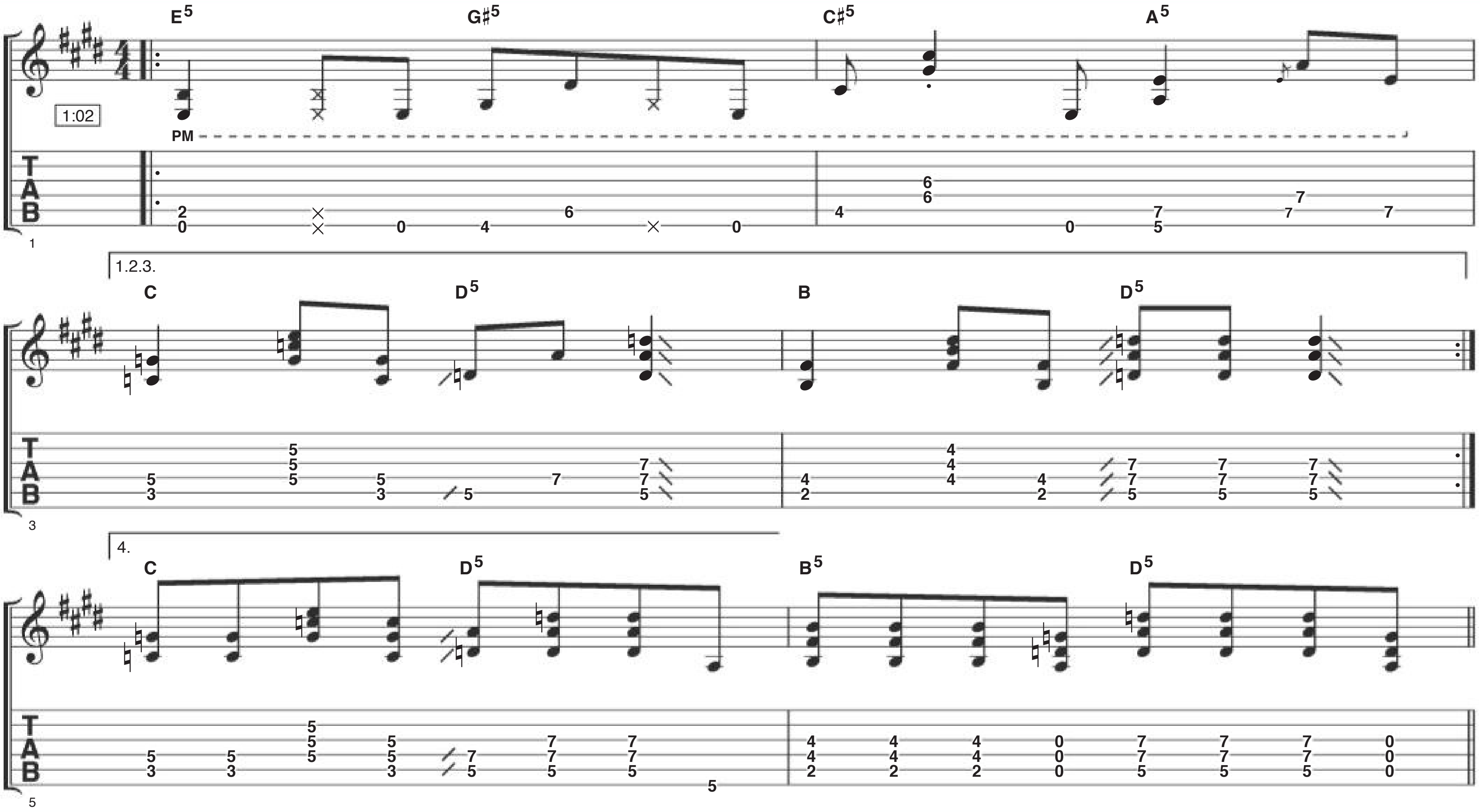
CLASSIC TRACK

NIRVANA - "LITHIUM" / Chorus (continued)



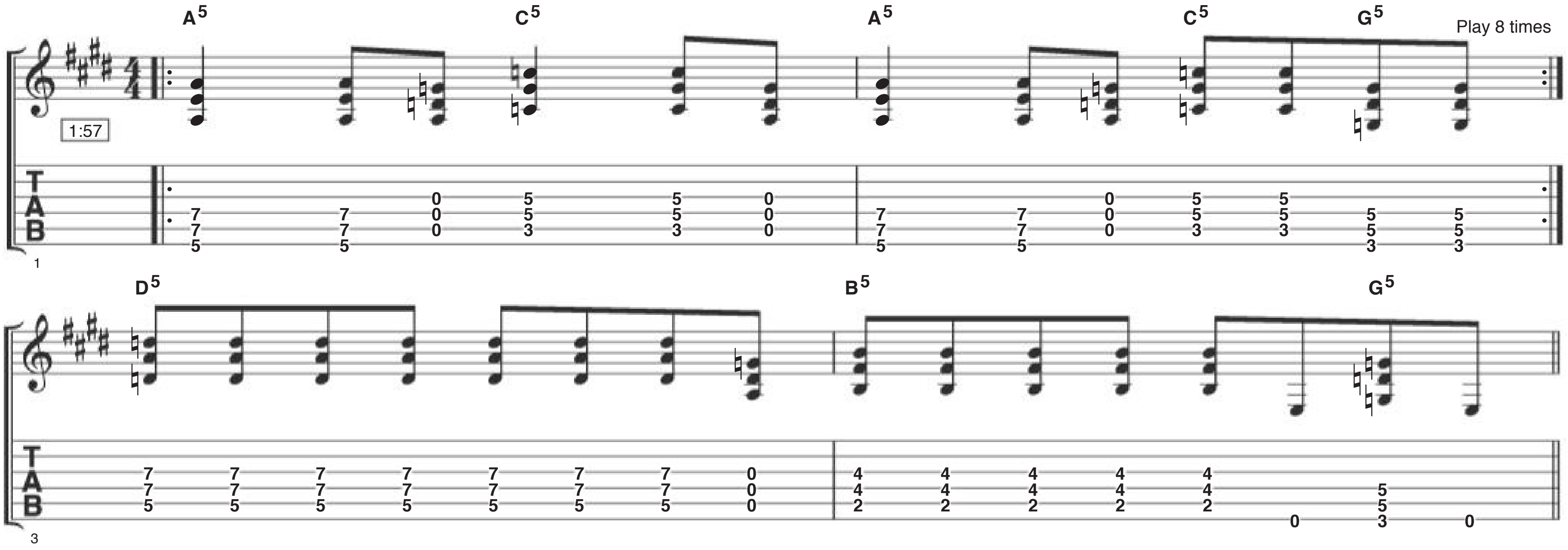
Fret both the second notes of the E5 powerchord in Bar #1 with your first finger. This leaves you in the best position to effectively move to the G#5 that follows. The open-string chords give you an extra moment to get your hand in position for the chord changes that follow.

NIRVANA - "LITHIUM" / Verse #2



This is another variation of the main intro riff, so the same rules apply. The grace note in Bar #2 is almost certainly a mistake, and was probably meant to be played on the offbeat of Beat #3. You can ignore this note entirely if you prefer, and just focus once again on maintaining the groove.

NIRVANA - "LITHIUM" / Bridge



Bash out these powerchords with loose alternate picking throughout, fretting them with your first and third fingers. Cobain makes subtle changes on subsequent repeats of Bar #2. In one repeat, he plays the C5 on the first quaver of Beat #4. In another, he adds a G#5 on the offbeat of Beat #4. Try improvising with these ideas.

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“TANGERINE”

LET’S UN-PEEL JIMMY PAGE’S DOUBLE-TRACKED ACOUSTIC PARTS IN THIS CLASSIC CUT FROM *LED ZEPPELIN III.*

With a slew of acoustic tracks, *Led Zeppelin III* marked a big direction change away from the band’s blues and rock beginnings – a risky move that brought mixed reviews but major success, topping album charts in both the UK and the US. Originally recorded with the Yardbirds (then titled “Knowing That I’m Losing You”), Page would record “Tangerine” for Led Zeppelin on 12-string acoustic with a second part double-tracked on a six-string.

The original recording is a quarter tone below concert pitch, but we’ve kept our backing track in standard tuning, and we’ve omitted the ‘false start’, beginning at around 0:13. We’ve tabbed out the intro, complete with the most challenging line – a tricky arpeggio on C and G/B chords. Isolate this part and practise it slowly before gradually building up your speed.

CHORDS

This looks like a lot of chords, but several are easy adjustments to basic shapes. For example, Asus4 and Dsus4 are simple changes to Am and D chords. Keep an eye out for the slash chords (denoted by a ‘/’ slash mark), too. They’re simple enough. A C/G (said “C over G”) is a C chord with a G as its lowest note. G/B is a G chord where B is the lowest note. Easy! All of these embellishments are commonplace in folk music, and are Page trademarks too. The changes come quickly, though – we’ve left a few chord names off of the songsheet on the right to save space.

“TANGERINE”
Music and Lyrics by JIMMY PAGE
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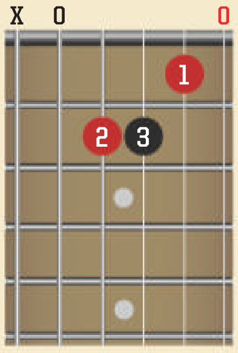
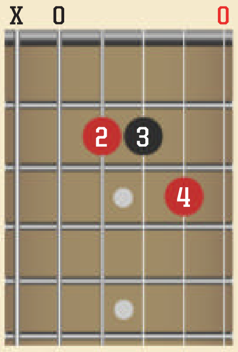
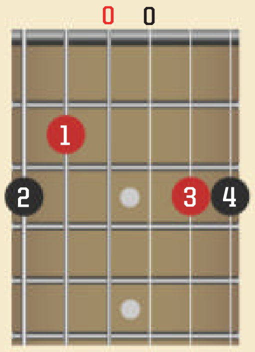


Am



Asus4



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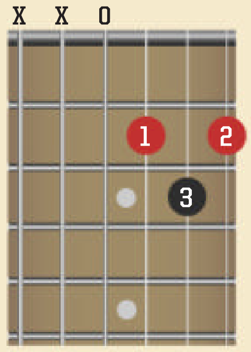
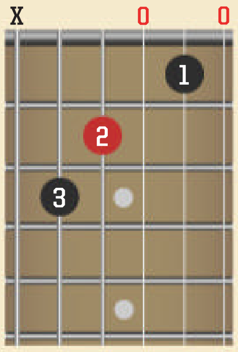
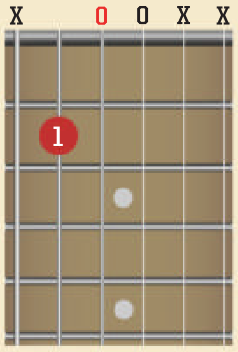


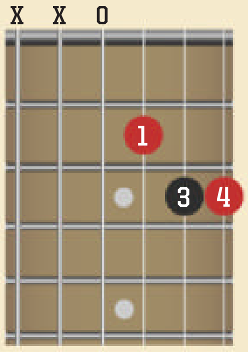
D



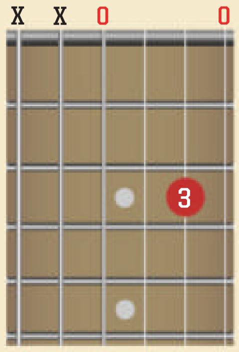
C



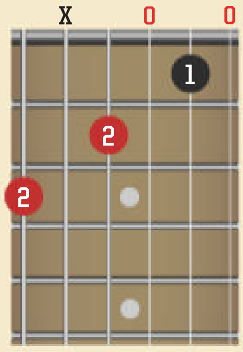
G/B



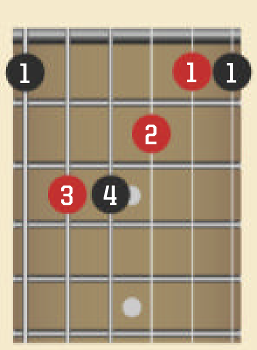
Dsus4



G6/D



C/G



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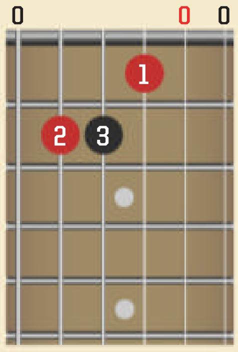
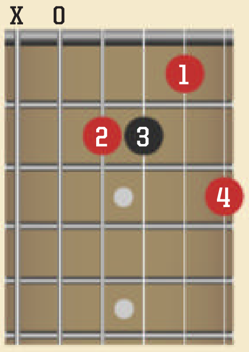
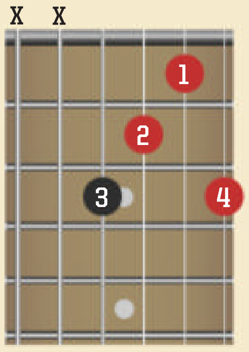


E



Am7



Fadd9

SONGSHEET

"TANGERINE"

Verse 1

Am G D
Measuring a summer's day
Am G D C G/B
I only finds it slips away to grey
Am G D C D
The hours, they bring me pain

Chorus

G D C D
Tangerine, Tangerine
G D C D
Living reflections from a dream
G D
I was her love
C D
She was my queen
G
And now a thousand years...
D
Between

Verse 2

Am G D
Thinking how it used to be
Am G D
Does she still remember times
C G/B
like these?
Am G D
To think of us again...

And I do

Solo

Am C/G D F
E F E F C G D C D

Repeat Chorus

Break

D x4
(Be) - tween

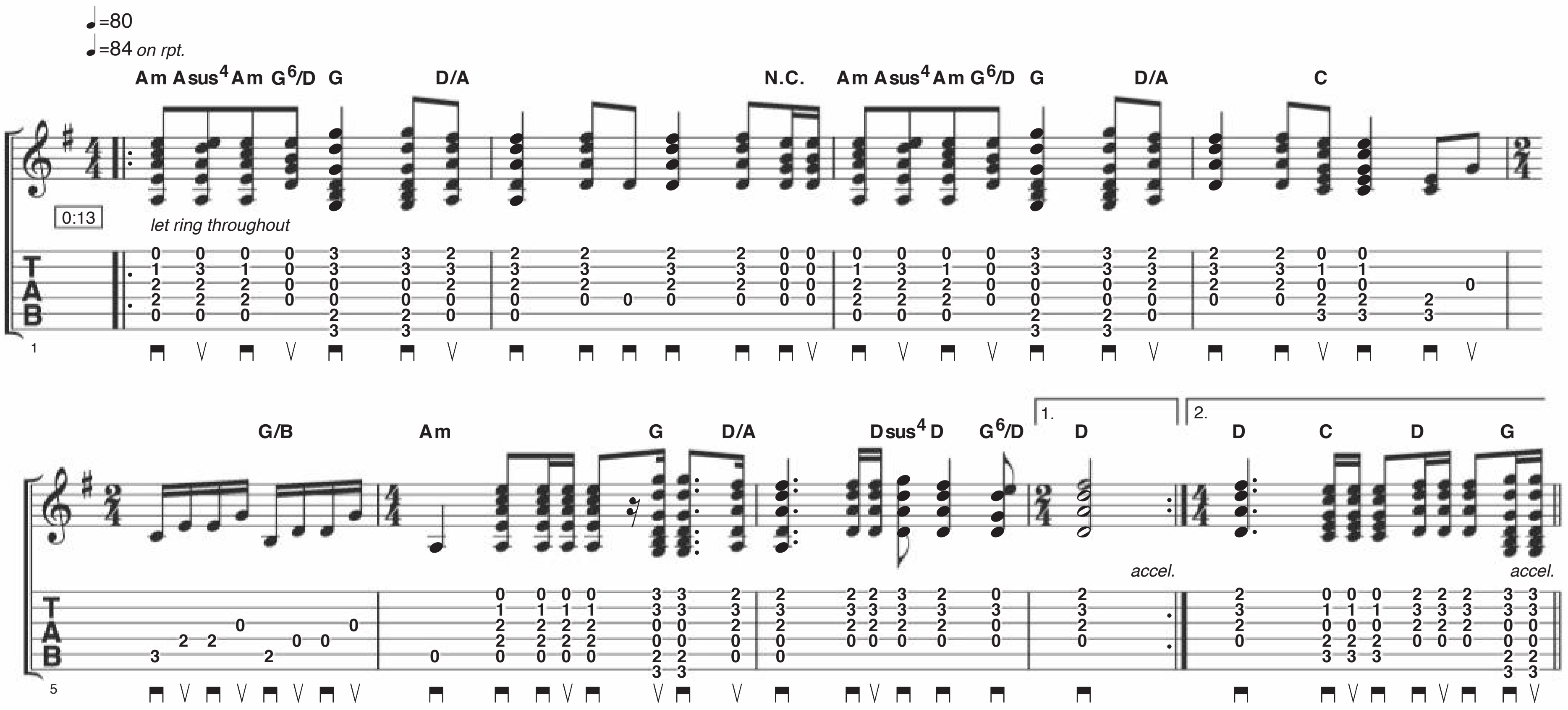
Interlude

D x2
D Dsus4 D G6/D x4

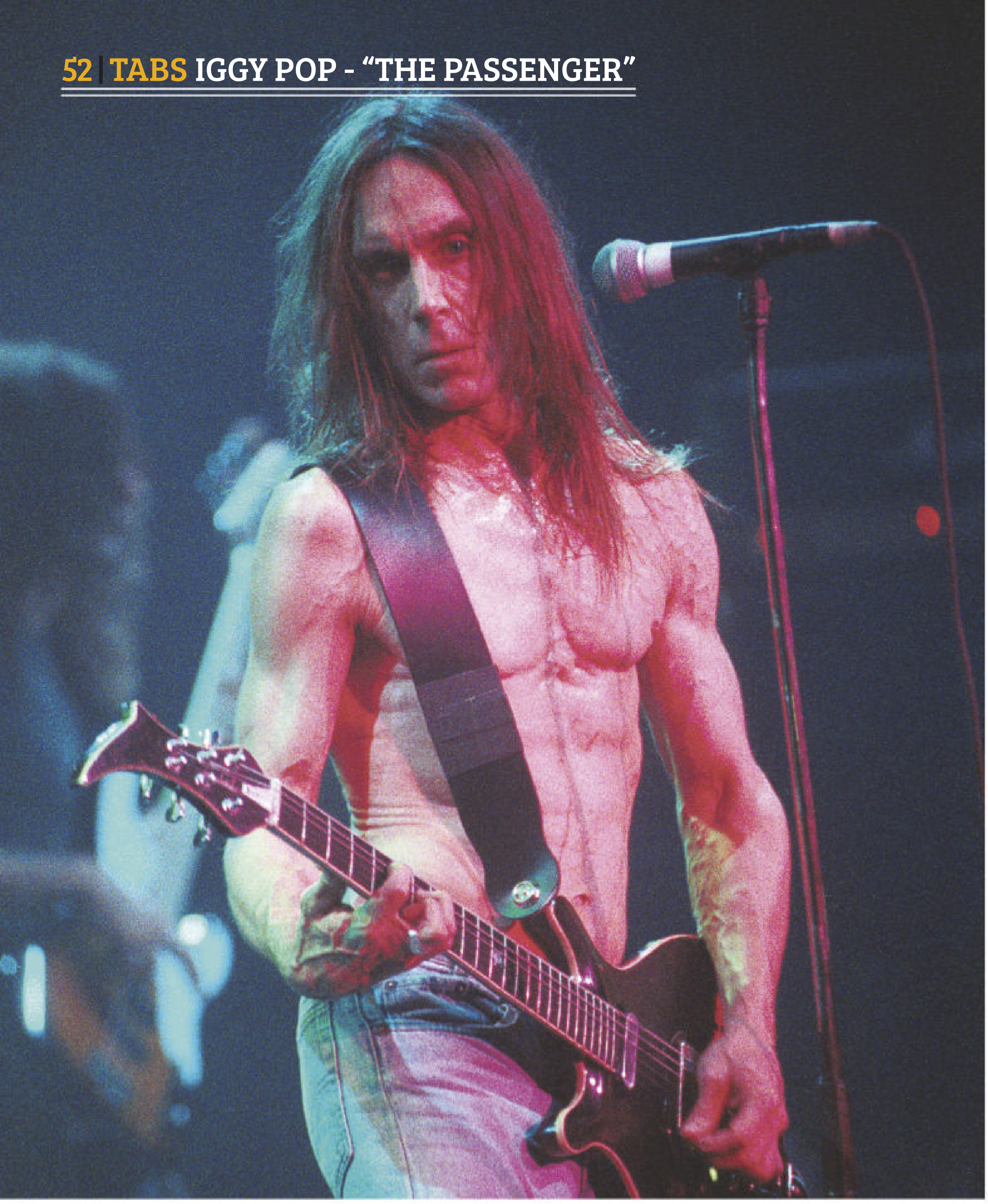
Outro

Am7 Am G Fadd9 G

LED ZEPPELIN - "TANGERINE" / Intro


♩=80
♩=84 on rpt.
0:13
Am Asus4 Am G6/D G
D/A
N.C.
Am Asus4 Am G6/D G
D/A
C
let ring throughout
TAB
1
G/B
Am
G
D/A
Dsus4 D
G6/D
1.
D
2.
D
C
D
G
accel.
accel.
5

The picking directions under the tab tell you how Jimmy plays the intro – and you'll be strumming Bars #1, #3 and #4 at half the speed of the rest of the music. Here, Jimmy lays back into gentle eighth-note strumming, compared to 16th-note playing elsewhere. Notice the subtle tempo changes, too: the song begins at 80 beats per minute, peaks at 90 in the chorus, and pulls back to 84 in Verse #2.



IGGY POP
“THE PASSENGER”

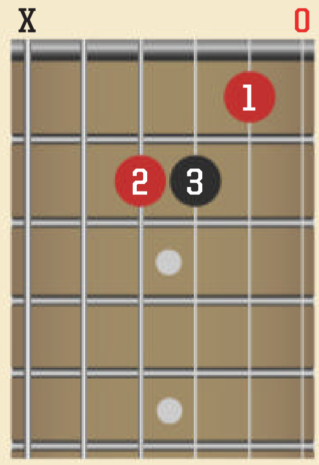
TAKE A TOUR OF THE STRUMMED CHORDS IN THIS PROTO-PUNK ODE TO THE NOMADIC ROCK ’N’ ROLL LIFESTYLE.

In 1974, punk forerunners The Stooges called it a day after revolutionising the rock ’n’ roll landscape, cutting three killer albums and producing some of the most exhilarating and crazed live shows the world had ever seen. Come 1977, explosive frontman Iggy Pop was recording his sophomore solo album Lust For Life, aided and abetted by close friend David Bowie on production duties, and Edinburgh-born guitarist Ricky Gardiner, who would pen the song’s cyclic four-chord progression, complete with alternating endings on G and E.

Those chords are easy to play, but, as Gardiner related to *Total Guitar*, “It becomes a kind of torture because there’s no variation and there’s no middle eight. It just goes on doing that, and that alternating has to keep going… I’m not sure it’s completely correct on the record. I haven’t checked, but Iggy never looked for refinement anyway.”

CHORDS

This track essentially boils down to a two-bar chord progression (Am-F-C-G), with the final chord swapping between G and E chords on each repeat. With two chords per bar, there are just these five simple chords to learn. If you struggle with barre chords, you could use standard open position C and G chords instead. F can be simplified by playing just the top four strings, so you don’t have to play a full barre across all the strings.



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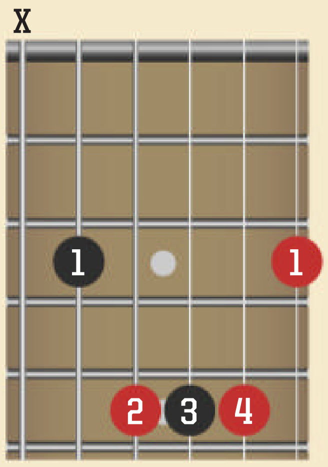

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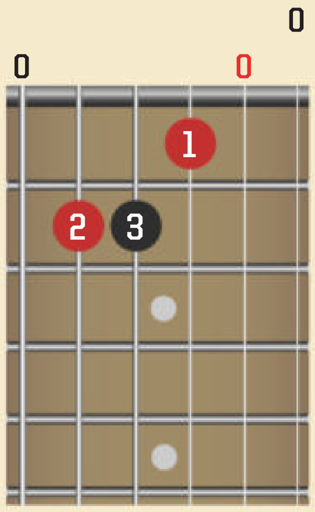

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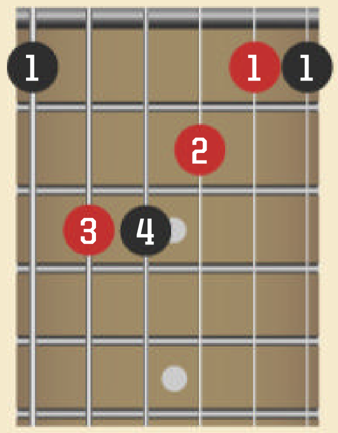

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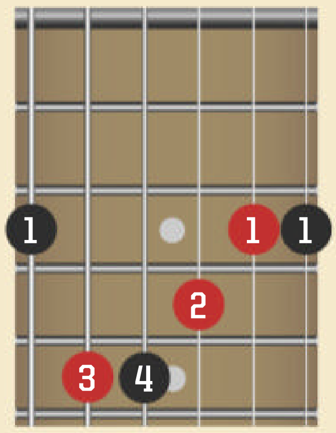

G

“THE PASSENGER”
Words and Music by Iggy Pop and Ricky Gardiner
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SONGSHEET

"THE PASSENGER"

Intro

Am F C G Am F C E x3

Verse 1

Am F C G
I am the passenger
Am F C E
And I ride and I ride
Am F C G
I ride through the city's backsides
Am F C E
I see the stars come out of the sky
Am F C G
Yeah, the bright and hollow sky
Am F C E
You know it looks so good tonight

Bridge 1

Am F C G Am F C E

Verse 2

Am F C G
I am the passenger
Am F C E
I stay under glass
Am F C G
I look through my window so bright
Am F C E
I see the stars come out tonight
Am F C G
I see the bright and hollow sky
Am F C E
Over the city's ripped back sky
Am F C G
And everything looks good tonight

Bridge 2

Am F C E

Chorus 1

Am F C G
Singing la la, la la, la-la-la la
Am F C E
La la, la la, la-la-la la
Am F C G
La la, la la, la-la-la la, la la

Bridge 3

Am F C E Am F C G

Verse 3

Am F C G
Get into the car
Am F C E
We'll be the passenger
Am F C G
We'll ride through the city tonight
Am F C E
We'll see the city's ripped backsides
Am F C G
We'll see the bright and hollow sky
Am F C E
We'll see the stars that shine so bright
Am F C G
Stars made for us tonight

Repeat bridge 3 & bridge 2

Verse 4

Am F C G
Oh, the passenger
Am F C E
How, how he rides
Am F C G
Oh, the passenger
Am F C E
And he rides and he rides
Am F C G
He looks through his window
Am F C E
What does he see?
Am F C G
He sees the sign and hollow sky
Am F C E
He sees the stars come out tonight
Am F C G
He sees the city's ripped backsides
Am F C E
He sees the winding ocean drive
Am F C G
And everything was made for you and me
Am F C E
All of it was made for you and me
Am F C G
But it just belongs to you and me
Am F C E
So let's take a ride and see what's mine

Repeat bridge 1, chorus 1 & bridge 3

Verse 5

Am F C G
Oh, the passenger
Am F C E
He rides and he rides
Am F C G
He sees things from under glass
Am F C E
He looks through his window side
Am F C G
He sees the things that he knows are his
Am F C E
He sees the bright and hollow sky
Am F C G
He sees the city sleep at night
Am F C E
He sees the stars are out tonight
Am F C G
And all of it is yours and mine
Am F C E
And all of it is yours and mine
Am F C G
So let's ride and ride and ride and ride

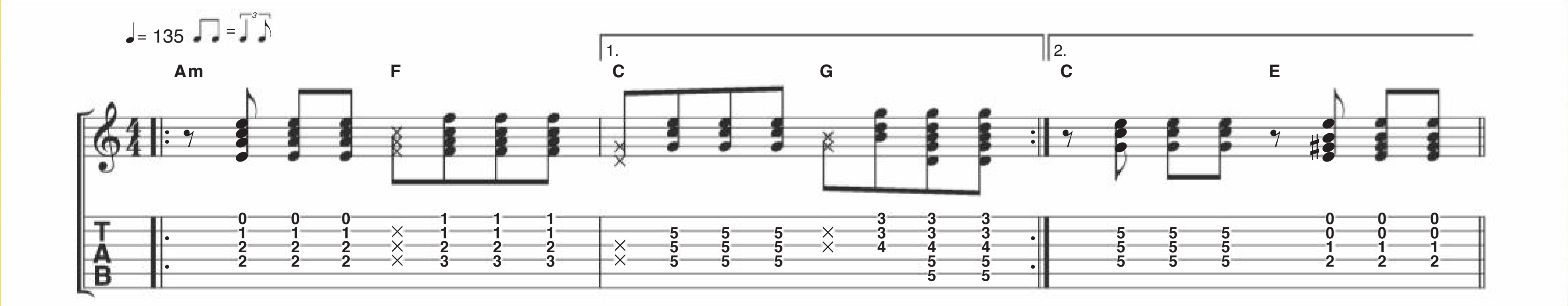
Repeat bridge 3

Chorus 2

Am F C E
Singing la la, la la, la-la-la la
Am F C G
La la, la la, la-la-la la
Am F C E
La la, la la, la-la-la la, la la

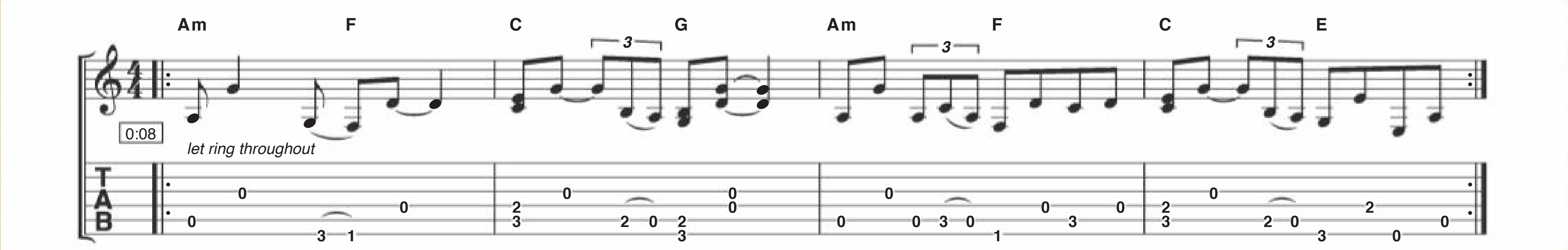
Repeat bridge 2, then chorus 1 to fade

IGGY POP - "THE PASSENGER" / Intro (strumming)

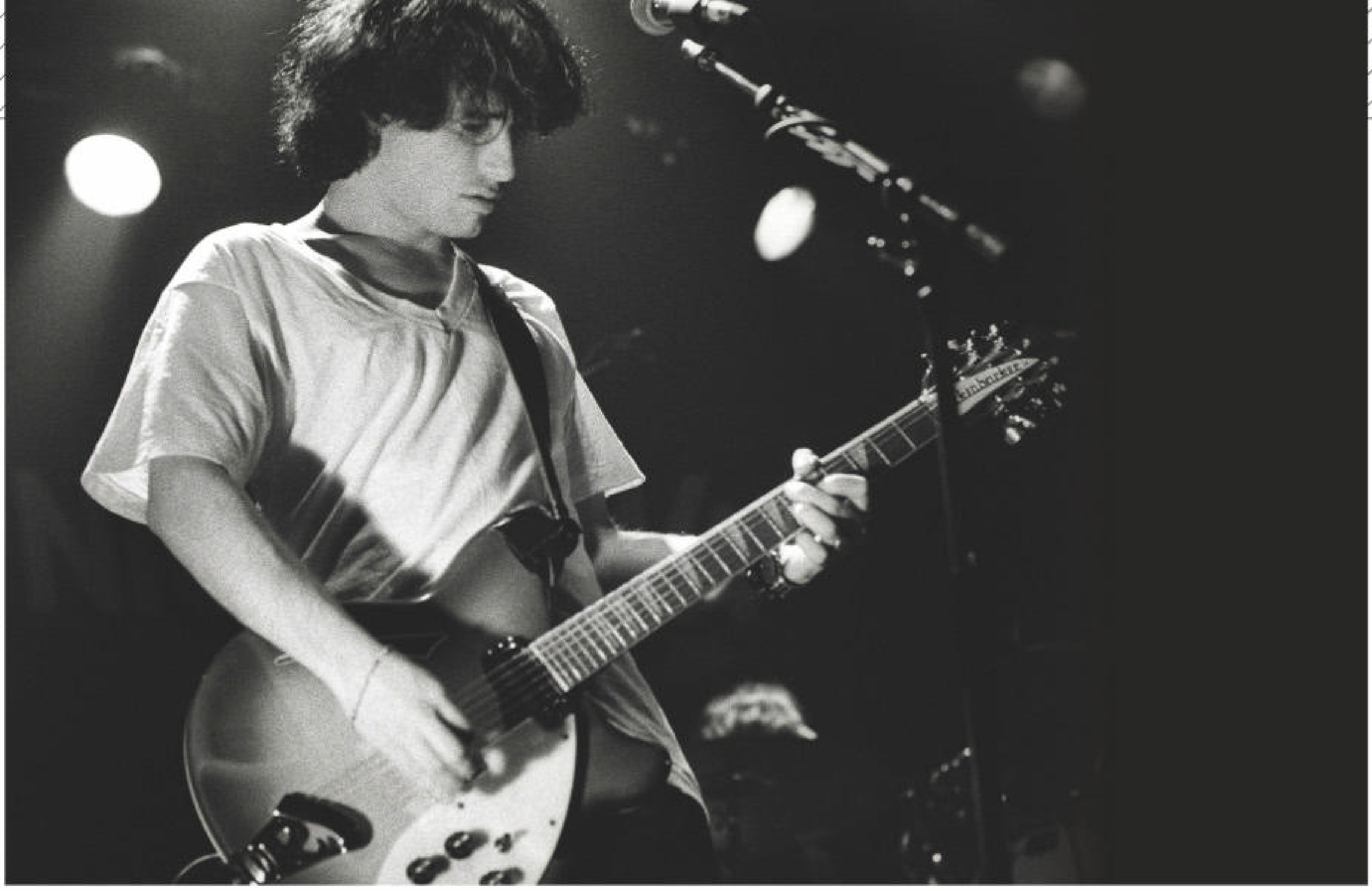


Use a relaxed alternate strumming motion here, starting on an upstroke on the first Am chord. Keep a constant alternate-picking rhythm going, so that you 'ghost' a downstroke on the rests between the chords (rests are shown as 'x' symbols in the notation) without hitting the strings.

IGGY POP - "THE PASSENGER" / Intro (arpeggios)



These arpeggios are played along with the strummed part. They loosely follow the chords but there are some other notes, too, so you can't just hold down the chord shapes here. Try to identify the notes that aren't in the main chords and devise a suitable fingering to play them.



Right: Jeff Buckley's impressive fingerstyle took in the sixth string to great effect

PHOTO BY ROB VERHORST/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

WORDS AND LESSONS BY
RICHARD BARRETT.

OPEN G TUNING

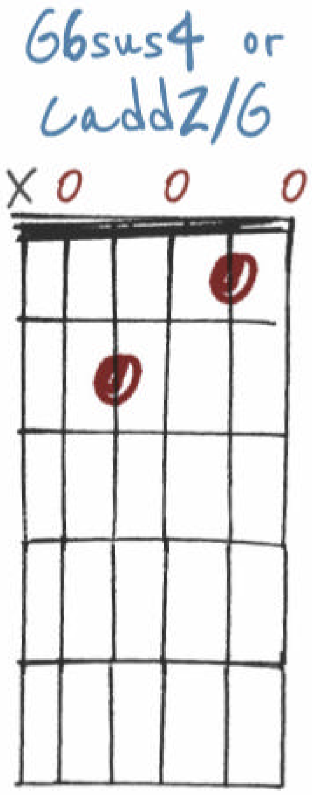
WHILE **KEITH RICHARDS** MAY BE CONTENT WITH FIVE-STRING OPEN G-TUNED LICKS, HE'S MISSING OUT ON THAT SIXTH STRING GOODNESS.

Open G, one of the most popular and widely used open tunings, is particularly associated with Keith Richards who used it on a number of tracks, including "Honky Tonk Women" and "Start Me Up". It retains the core of standard tuning on the second, third and fourth strings (D, G and B) but both high and low E strings are dropped a tone to D. The fifth/A string is also lowered to G, making it the root note of most shapes – so much so that Keith Richards stopped bothering at all with the sixth string on the guitars he keeps in this tuning!

However, there are some fantastic chords available using the sixth string for more fingerstyle/folky areas, and these take into consideration such players as Robert Johnson, Gram Parsons, Jimmy Page and Jeff Buckley who used all six strings. On both the electric and acoustic guitar, this open G tuning offers potential for a country/blues feel and surprisingly complex extended voicings, without undue strain on the hands. What's not to like?

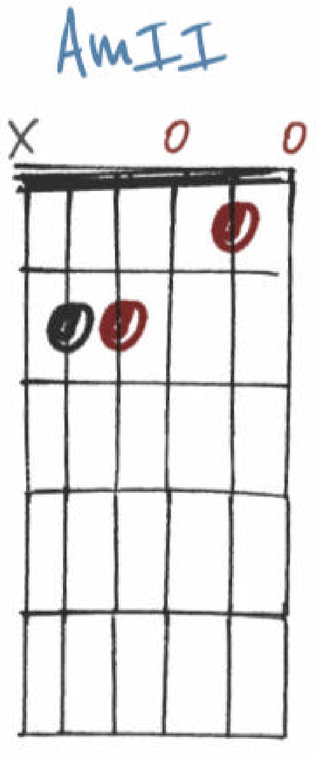
EXAMPLE #1

We can view this chord in a couple of ways. Taking the open fifth (G) as our root, we might view the E on the fourth string as the sixth and the C on the second string as a sus4, giving G6sus4. You could also look at the C major triad of E, G and C on the fourth, third and second strings and say this is a Cadd2/G. Both are correct!



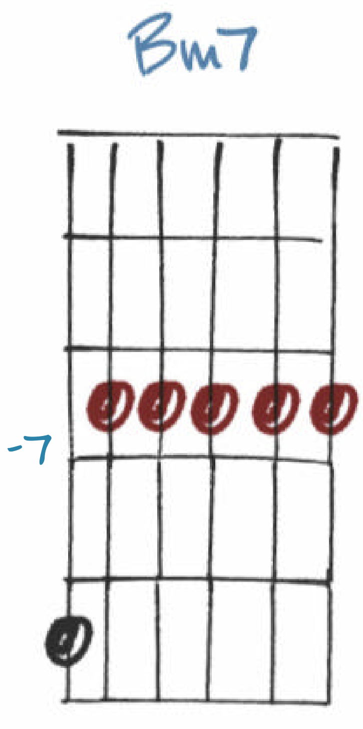
EXAMPLE #2

Changing the root to an A changes how we see and hear the chord; it is now a clear case of Amin 11! The open first (D) string at the top gives an open quality to the whole chord, which is pretty much impossible in standard tuning. Like Example #1, this is moveable, so experiment.



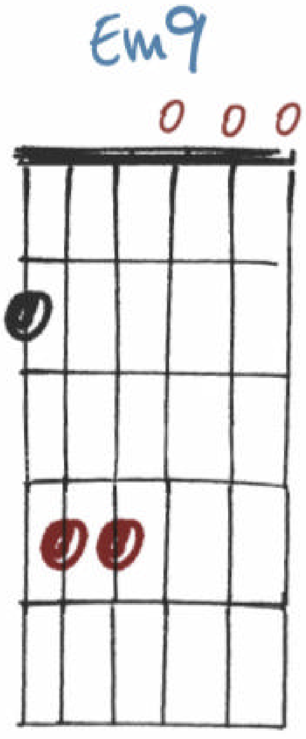
EXAMPLE #3

One of the full six-string chords available is this distinctive voicing of Bmin7 (root on the sixth string). Try moving this to different positions (including open) while strumming and you'll start get an inkling of how the riff from Jeff Buckley's Last Goodbye came about. Hint: F#min7, Amin7, Emin7 and Bmin7...



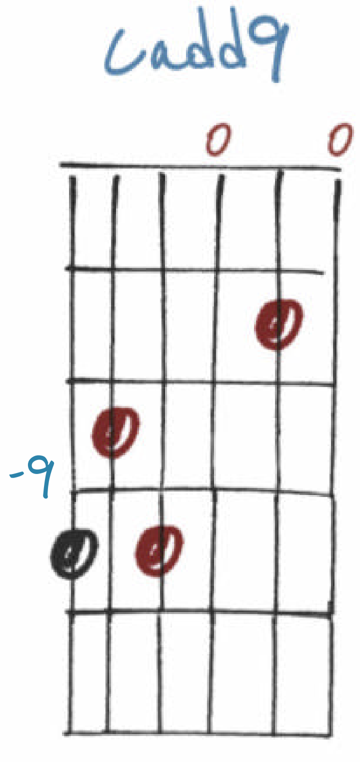
EXAMPLE #4

Here is a very complex sounding Emin9. It is almost two chords in one, with the Emin9 being spelled out by the lower three strings (E, B, F#) and a G major triad superimposed on top (G, B, D). It's worth trying other positions, too; some may not be as lovely as this, but there are some interesting options!



EXAMPLE #5

This Cadd9 chord makes use of the open first and third strings, with the root on the sixth. Try moving it up or down for some different ideas and Steve Howe-type voicings, bearing in mind that the relationship between the open and fretted strings shifts every time you do.

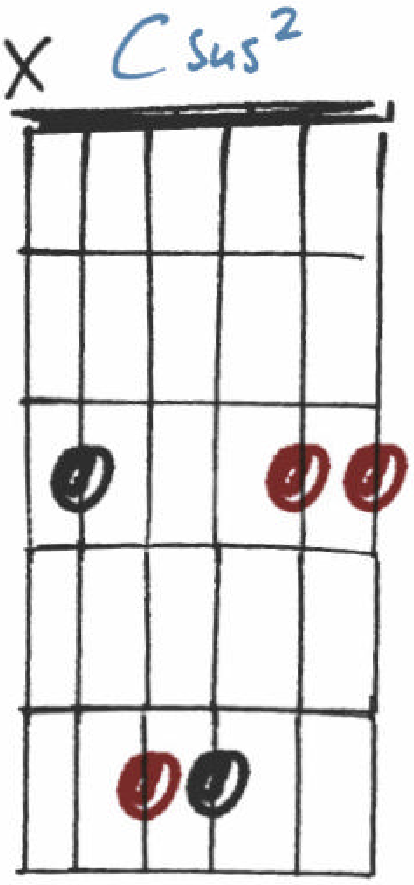


CHORDS BETWEEN MAJOR AND MINOR

THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL QUALITY OF ANY GIVEN CHORD IS ITS TONALITY…

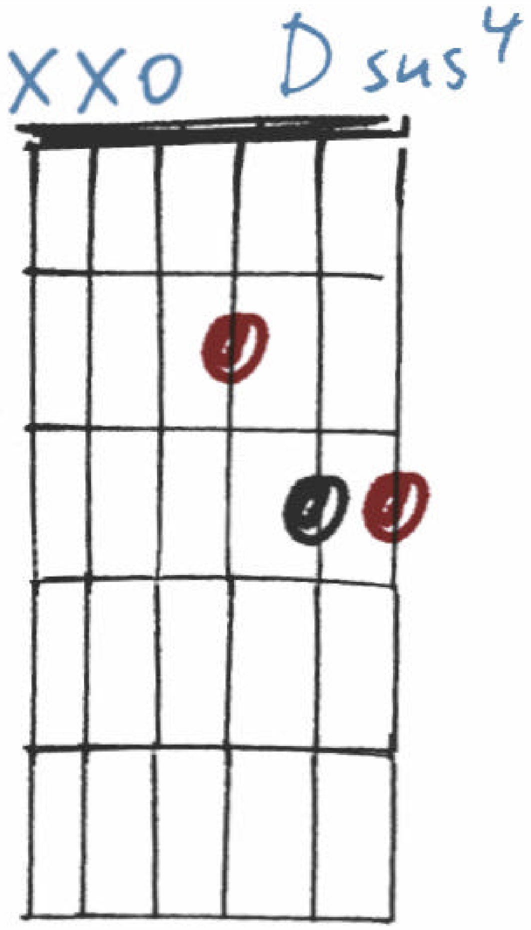
We learn that major keys or chords have a 'happy' sound and that minors can sound 'sad' – though different mixtures of the two can, of course, provide a variety of results. However, chords do not need to be a binary choice between major or minor. In fact, during the '60s, players such as Pete Townshend discovered that 'straight' major or minor chords could sound jarring through a distorted amp, the complex harmonics giving the wrong kind of overload as they hit the amp's circuit…

Enter the powerchord or '5' chord – root and fifth only. Problem solved and a new genre created! Of course, things didn't stop there. With or without an overdriven amp, players such as Townshend, Andy Summers and Alex Lifeson have all demonstrated that the root plus fifth formula can be expanded considerably without need to add a third – but still evoke a variety of moods.



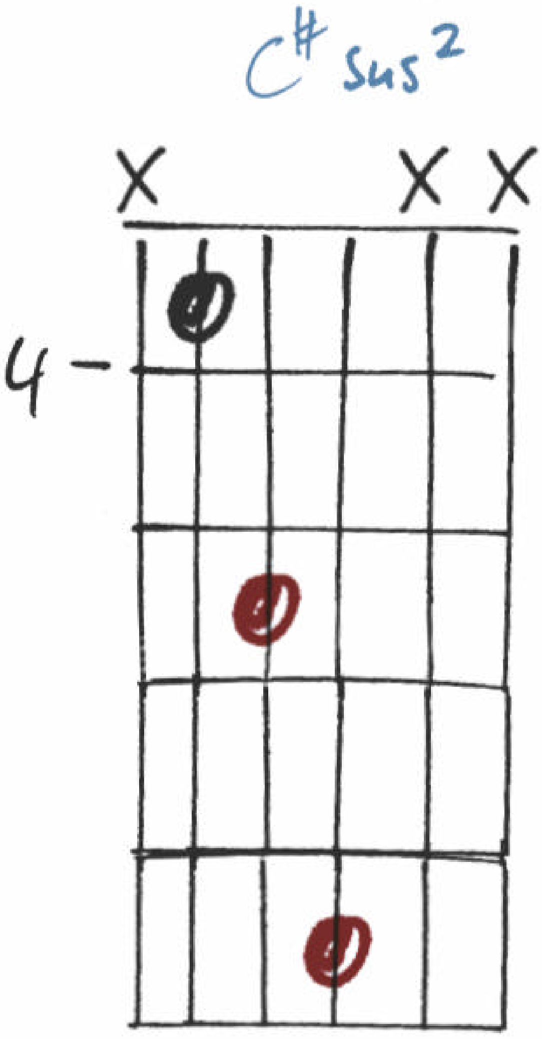
EXAMPLE #1

Sometimes referred to erroneously as an add9 (it isn't, as there is no third), this Csus2 is a real favourite when major or minor would be too 'grounded' and specific in a chord progression. Alex Lifeson of Rush loves this one, though it appears in a wide cross-section of popular music, from Crowded House to Van Halen.



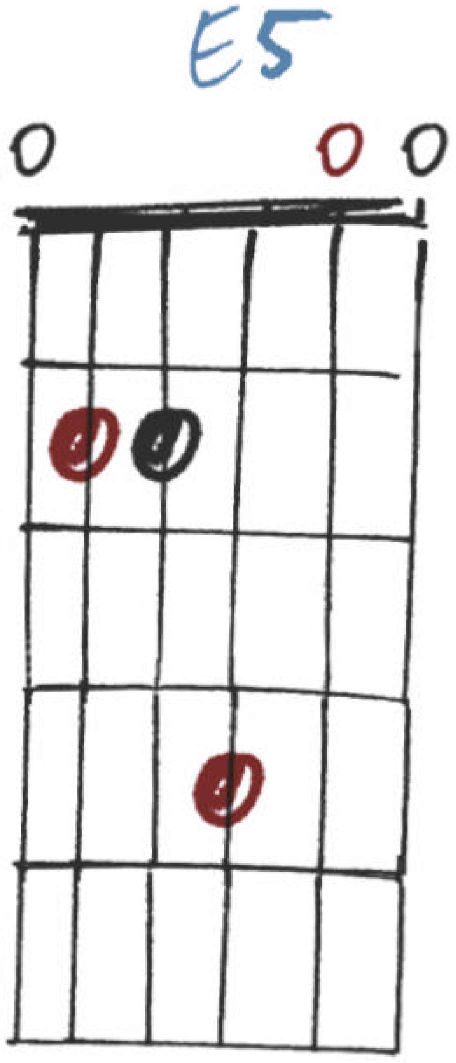
EXAMPLE #2

One of the first 'sus' chords many of us learn, this Dsus4 substitutes the fourth (G in this case) for the third, be that major or minor. However, most guitarists will be most accustomed to hearing the 'suspense' of the sus4 'resolve' to a major chord, think "Pinball Wizard" by The Who.



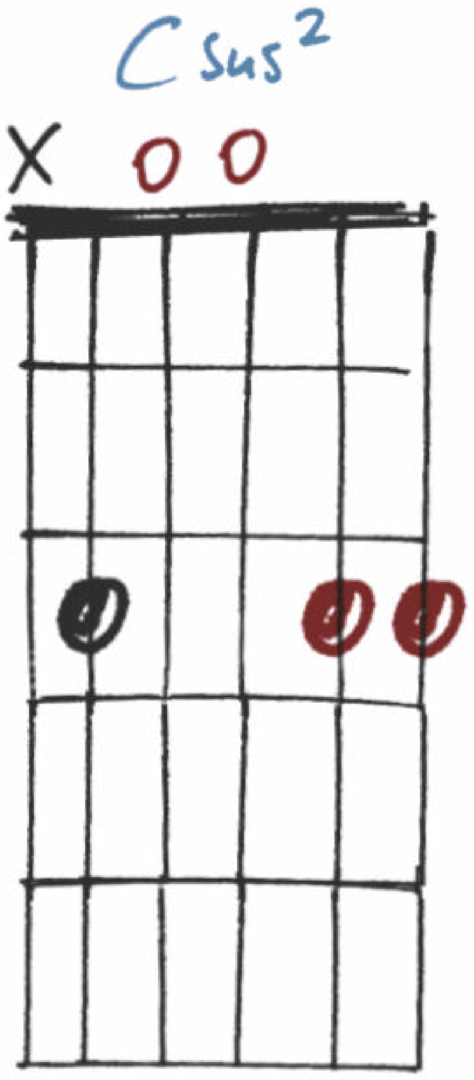
EXAMPLE #3

Many would rush to call this a C# minor ninth chord, but this is probably because of subliminally hearing "Message In A Bottle" with its minor key vocals. This example is, in fact, another flavour of sus2, with no third to give a major or minor tonality. It's complex stuff for such a minimal chord!



EXAMPLE #4

This E5 graces many Rush tunes, being a favourite of Alex Lifeson, who sought various ways to fill out the sound and harmony of the band with jangling distorted chords. Though he would employ major and minor thirds occasionally, this voicing is more typical and particularly distinctive to him.



EXAMPLE #5

This Csus2 is quite a complex, dissonant one, particularly when played distorted. Add the open low E string and we're veering back into Rush territory (think "Tom Sawyer"), but there are many applications for this. Nick Drake's "River Man" contains some similarly dark, mysterious voicings, so do experiment.

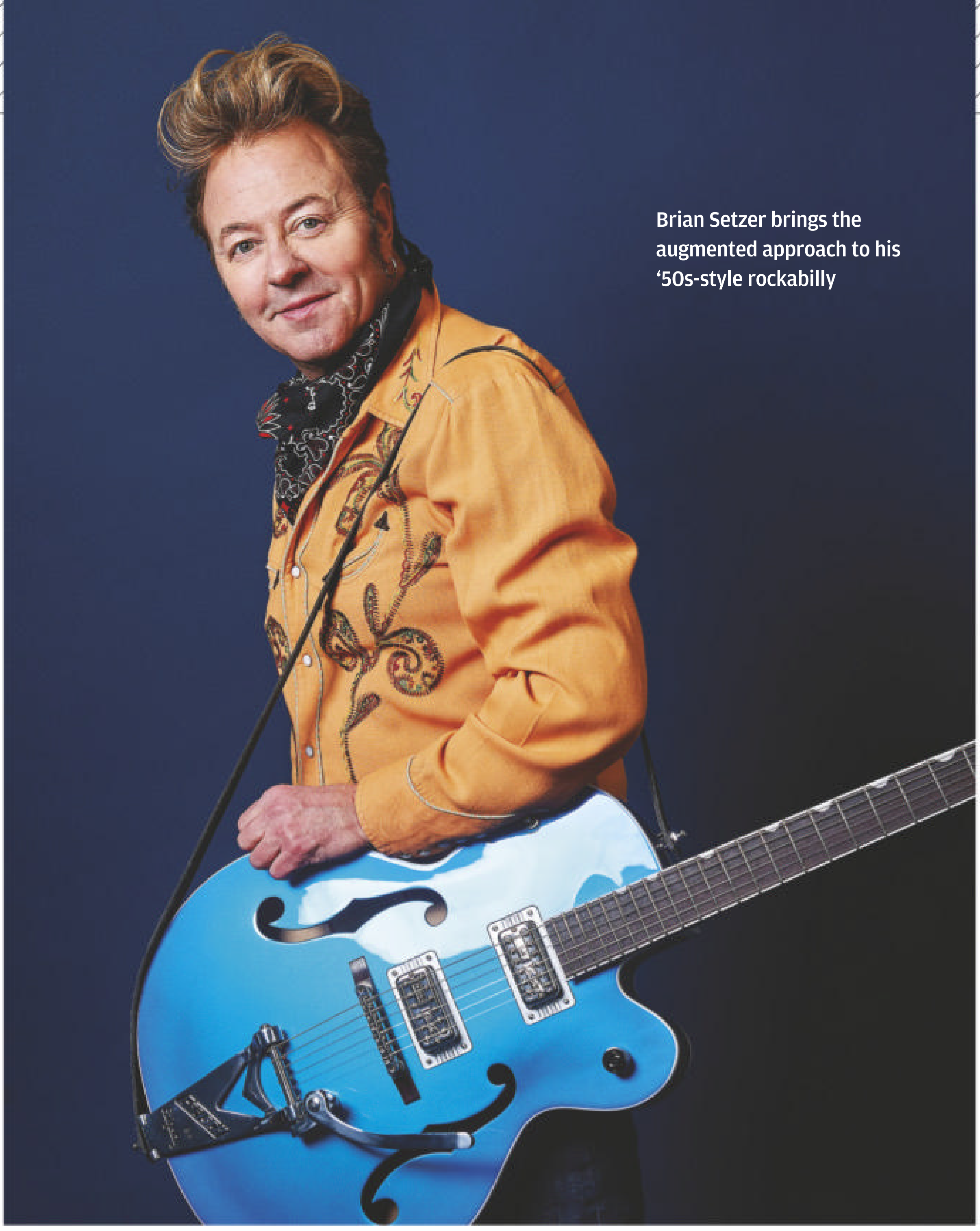
AUGMENTED CHORDS

LET'S DEMYSTIFY SOME NAMING CONVENTIONS AND OFFERS UP SOME CHORDS TO BRING A LITTLE TENSION TO YOUR LICKS.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, augmented is defined as "having been made greater in size or value". And in terms of a musical note, this translates as "denoting or containing an interval which is one semitone greater than the corresponding major or perfect interval". In this case, we'll talk about intervals contained within the context of a chord.

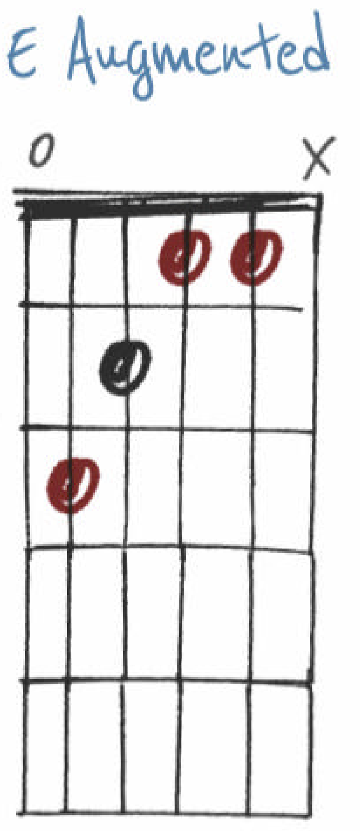
Admittedly chord-naming conventions are something of a minefield, with a lot of names taking a simplistic approach, presuming certain details are 'understood'. For example, a C7 chord contains a flat seventh (B♭) and a C9 chord adds a D to an existing seventh (♭7th!) chord...

The good news is these augmented chords are based purely on the premise of a raised/sharpened/augmented 5th, no other intervals have been altered. You will find this is the case in all but the most pedantic of chord charts – often written as 'Aug', 'Aug 5' or '+5'. In practice, these chords have a suspended 'tension' effect, often used in '50s-style rock 'n' roll, film soundtracks and other modern orchestral works. Hope you enjoy these – and don't get too tense!


Brian Setzer brings the augmented approach to his '50s-style rockabilly

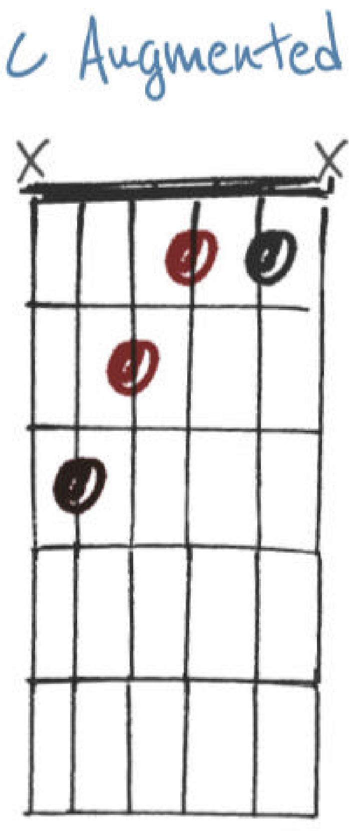
EXAMPLE #1

This E Augmented raises the fifth (B) to C on both the fifth and second strings. The open low E string gives us a satisfyingly dark root note. The effect is ominous but taken out of isolation and combined with an E major or E6 chord you can begin to see how it is not so scary really!



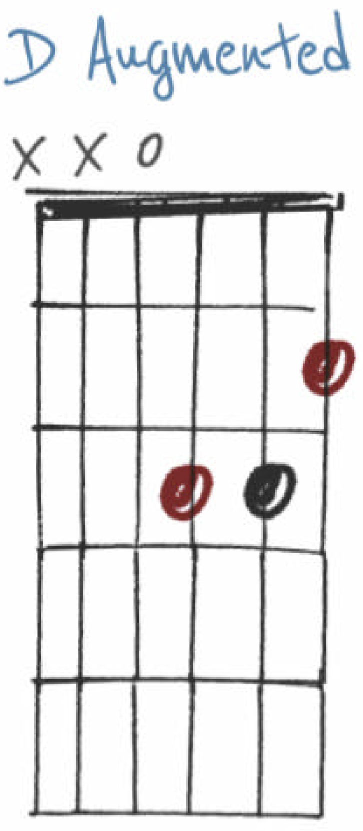
EXAMPLE #2

Just the one raised fifth (G to G#) in this C Augmented chord. However, the effect is still profound – though perhaps slightly brighter overall due to the less complex harmony on the lower strings. No open strings also means this shape can be moved anywhere on the fretboard, using the fifth string as the root.



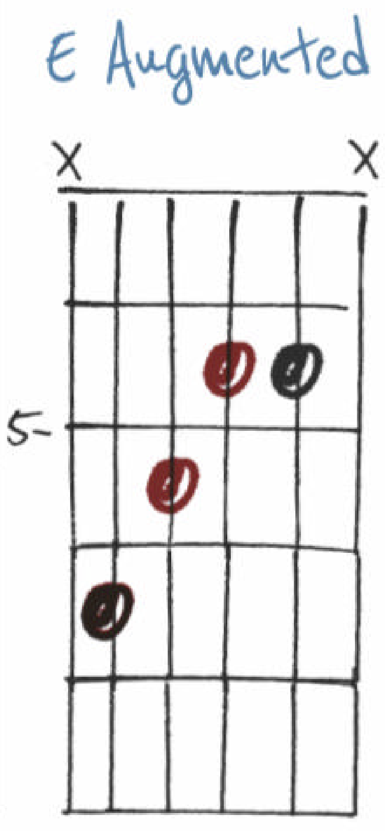
EXAMPLE #3

Moving up to the top four strings, this D Augmented is another shade brighter/less ominous but the 'tension and release' potential is still there. Try moving the augmented fifth up another semitone to make a Bm/D, or down to the second fret to revert to a non-augmented fifth and hear how the character changes.



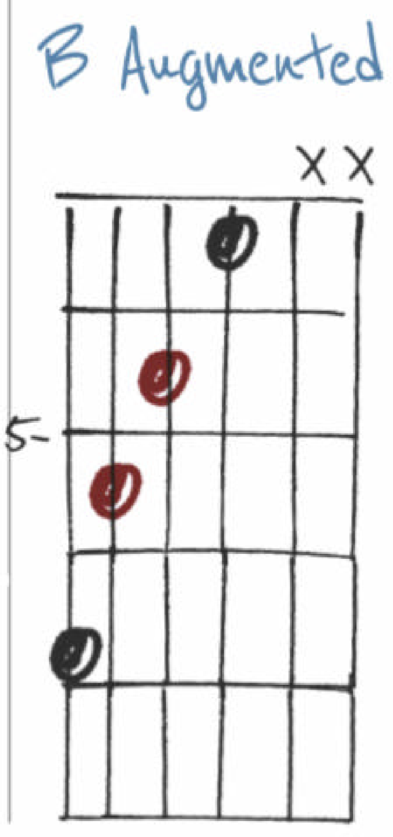
EXAMPLE #4

Another version of E Augmented, this is the same shape as Example #2 containing only one raised fifth. By comparing it with Example #1, you'll hear how the choice of voicing is a significant part of composition. Either will work technically but you will almost certainly prefer one over the other in a given context.



EXAMPLE #5

This is the darkest voicing of all – partly due to being played on the lower strings, though I've compensated by playing this B Augmented higher up the fretboard. This diagonal line of notes is another movable shape. And like all of these, it can be useful as a reference point when playing augmented single-note melodies/solos.

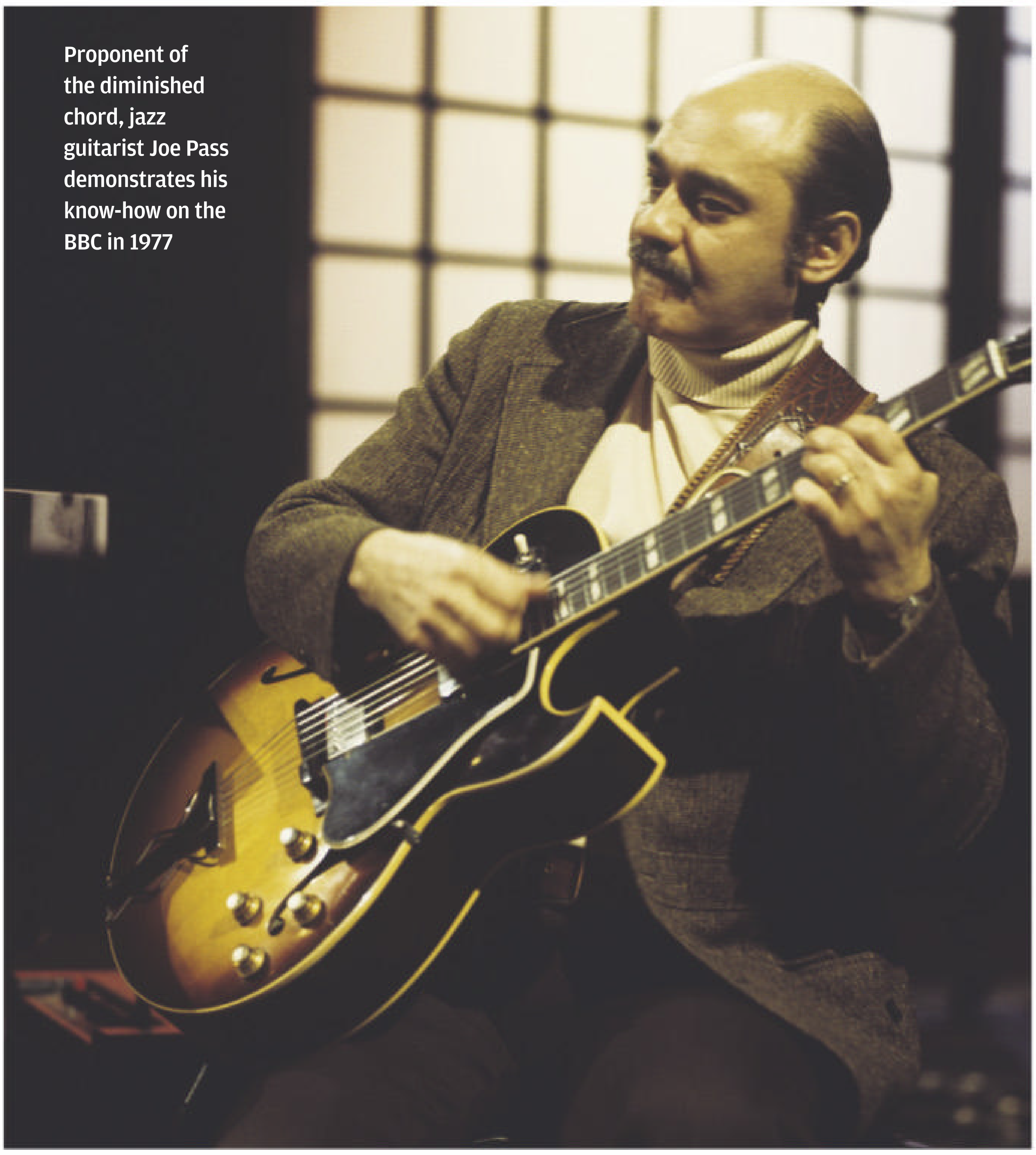


DIMINISHED AND HALF-DIMINISHED CHORDS

NESTLED AWAY IN JAZZ STANDARDS, THESE LESSER-SEEN CHORDS HAVE A PLACE IN ROCK AND POP STYLES, TOO.

Improvisation and composition have always been about working with harmony – and that's where we're headed this month. Diminished chords are not commonplace but they feature in many jazz, pop and rock songs, as well as neo-classical! Half-diminished sounds a little more mysterious at first so some relate more with its alternative name, minor seventh flat fifth (or m7b5). These also feature in many songs but are perhaps most commonly found in jazz standards.

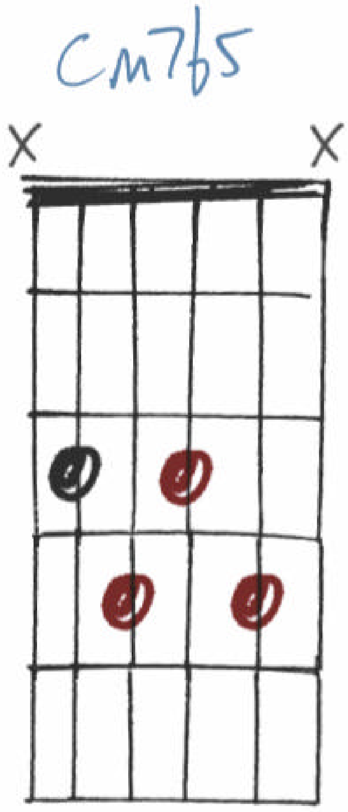
First, let's deal with the intervallic structure of each chord. Half-diminished (m7b5) consists of; Root, b3rd, b5th and b7th (see below for examples). A diminished chord follows an identical structure but flattens the seventh by another semitone, giving a 'double-flat' seventh ,or bb7. That would make it a sixth in other contexts, but don't be sidetracked by this – we got here by flattening or 'diminishing' the seventh, and it doesn't sound like a sixth chord at all!



Proponent of the diminished chord, jazz guitarist Joe Pass demonstrates his know-how on the BBC in 1977

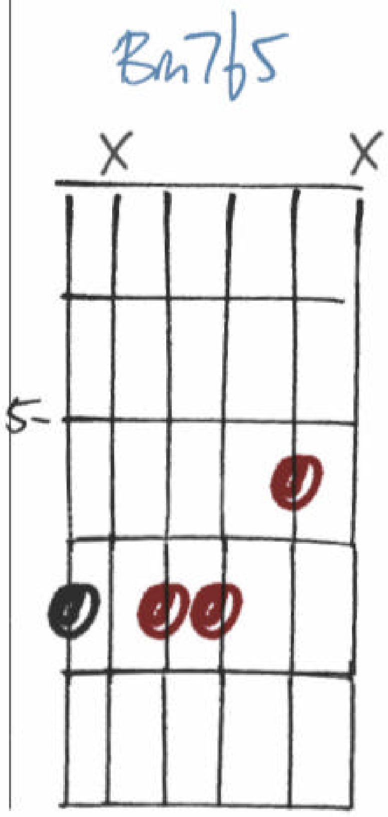
EXAMPLE #1

This C half-diminished/m7 b5 appears frequently in jazz standards, often as part of a II-V-I progression, for example, Cm7 b5-F7-B bmaj7. The b5 here ist he Gb happening on the fourth string. As an interesting bonus, playing this chord over an A b bass note turns the whole thing into a lovely "Stormy Monday"-style blues chord.



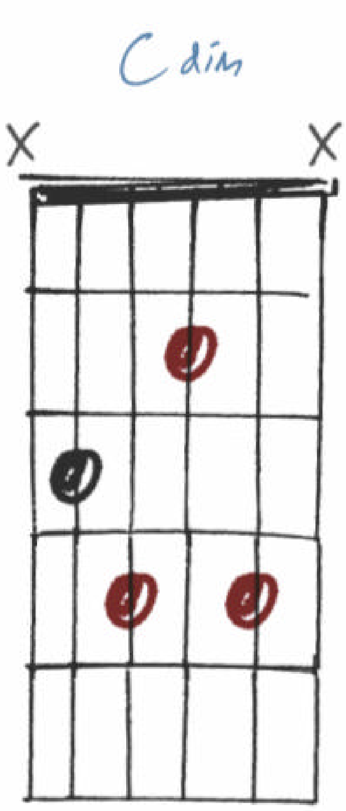
EXAMPLE #2

Here is another voicing of the half-diminished/m7 b5, this time in the key of B. You'll notice that the fifth string here is carefully muted. By angling the second finger as it holds down the root note on the sixth string, you can block the fifth from sounding easily. This could also be correctly referred to as a Dm/B slash chord.



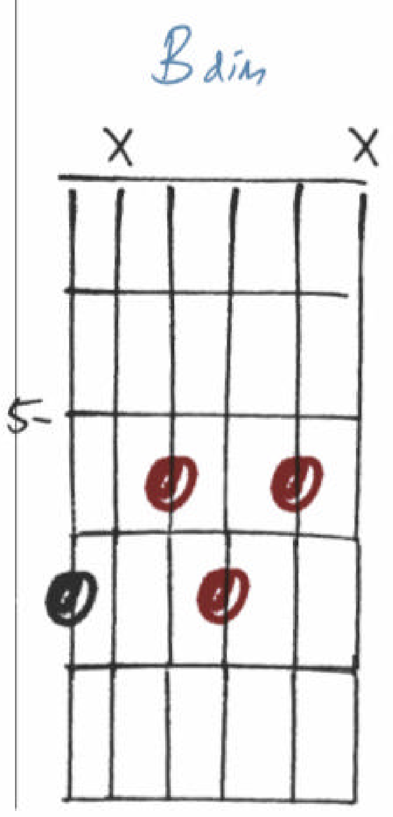
EXAMPLE #3

Here is the 'full' C diminished chord. You'll need to use slightly different fingering from the half-diminished to reach that A on the third string – this is the double flat 7 (b b7), giving it a darker, more dramatic sound. However, it can function as part of a II-V-I progression in exactly the same way as am7b5. The choice is yours!



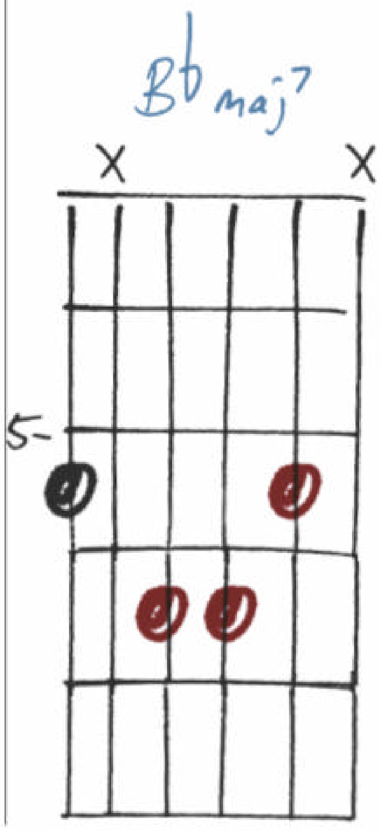
EXAMPLE #4

This alternative diminished voicing changes key back to B again, simply to give us a bit more variety. Once again, you'll need to look at reassigning your fretting-hand fingers carefully: using the third finger for the root note on the sixth string, carefully angled to mute the fifth is probably your best bet for this.



EXAMPLE #5

As an added bonus chord, let's check out this B b maj7. You'll notice that the only difference between this and the Bm7 b 5 chord featured earlier is the root note on the sixth string, which has been flattened by a semitone. Does that mean the two could work together beautifully in a jazz-tinged composition? Absolutely.

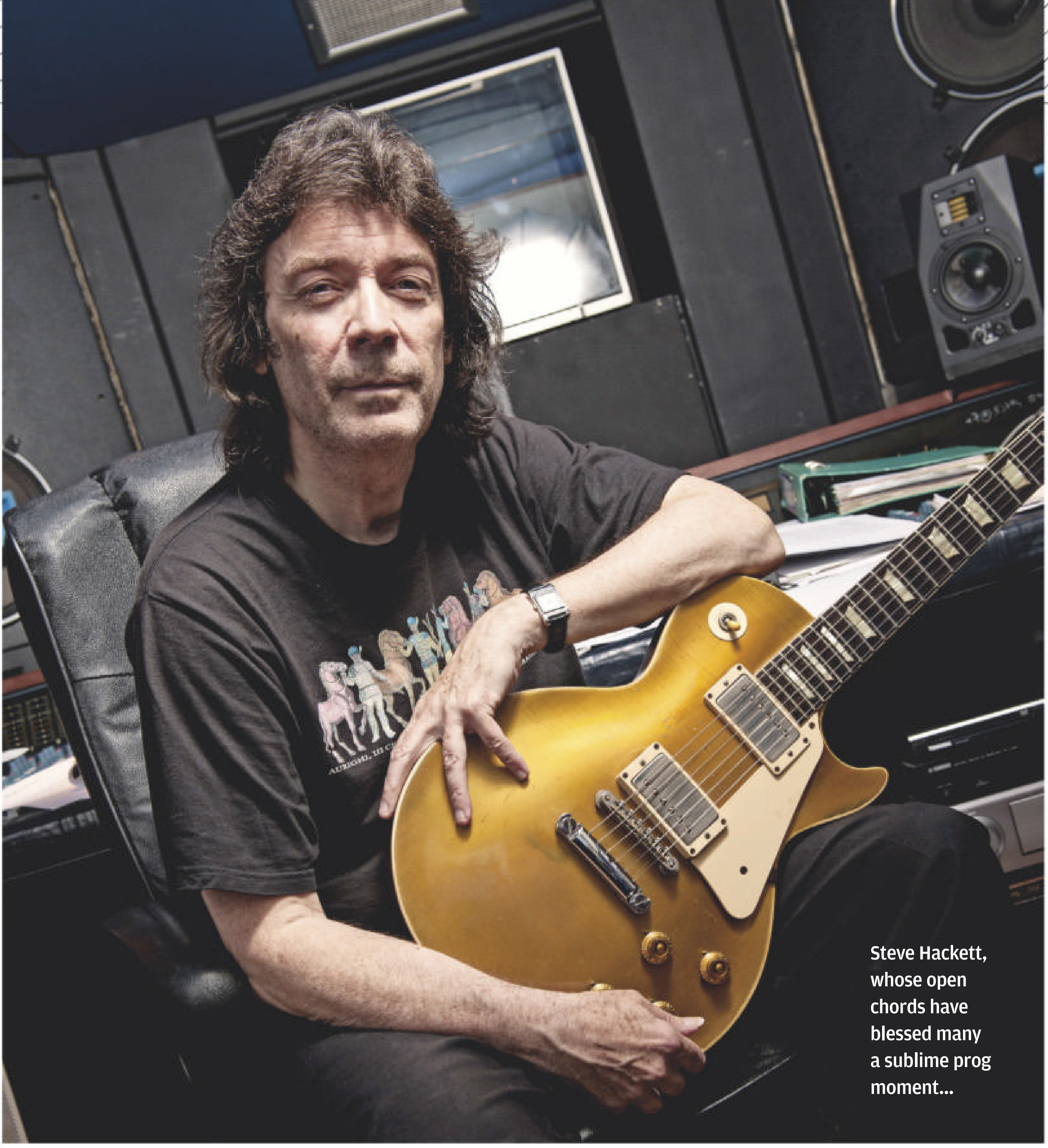


OPEN CHORDS

EXPLORE THE ATMOSPHERIC JANGLE OF MUSIC'S ESTEEMED CHORDMASTERS.

One of the most notable characteristics of the guitar is its ability to play the same note in a number of different locations, giving correspondingly different tonal characteristics. There are various ways to explore this, one of the most effective being moving chord shapes that contain open strings freely around the fretboard and making a note of what you find. By doing so, you'll be following in the footsteps of such luminaries as Steve Hackett, Steve Howe, Alex Lifeson and Andy Summers, to name just a handful.

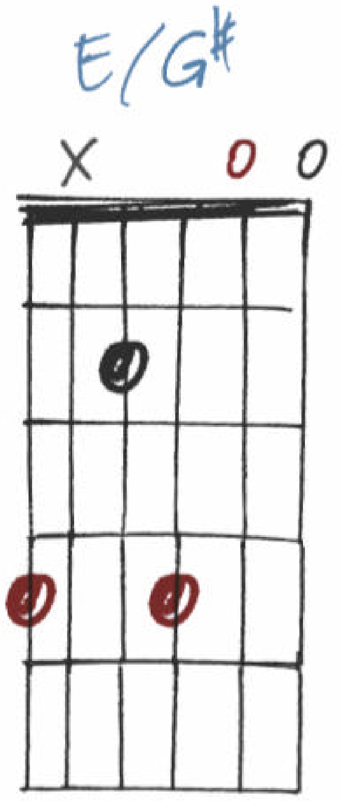
It is mostly one shape that features here, though I have included a rather nice Emaj7 to conclude, giving a set of chords that could work well together in a prog-rock style composition. When taking this approach, you'll find there are lots of dissonant chords, as well as interesting suspended ideas and ringing doubled notes. How far 'out there' you want to go depends as much on the context as it does your confidence as a composer!



Steve Hackett, whose open chords have blessed many a sublime prog moment...

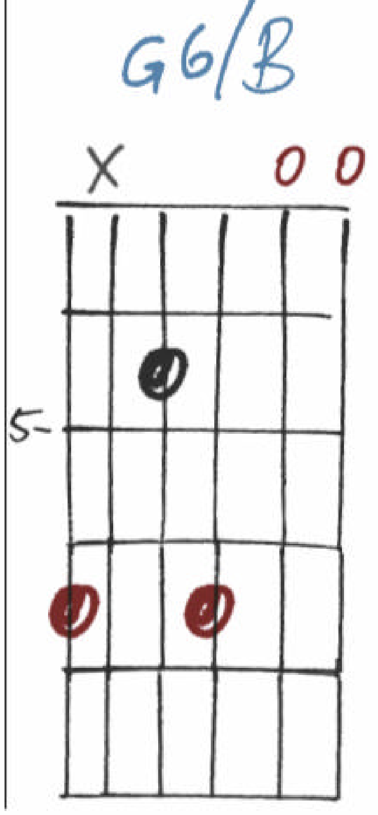
EXAMPLE #1

In this E/G# chord, like most of these shapes, the fifth string is muted and the major third is at the bottom, taking the form of what classical arrangers call 'first inversion'. Note the duplicate Bs on the third and open second strings. If you want a minor version, simply lower the bottom note a semitone to G!



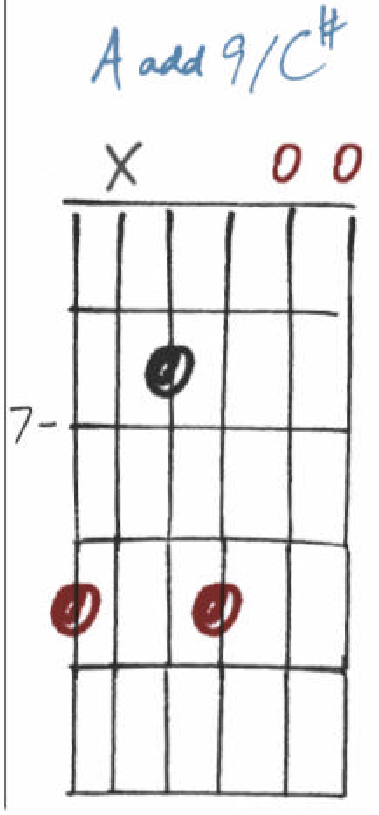
EXAMPLE #2

Shifting the same shape up a few frets, we preserve the main intervallic structure but the relationship with the remaining open strings shifts to give a different sound – and a different name! Essentially a G/B chord, the open to E string gives a sixth on the top, making the most logical name G6/B.



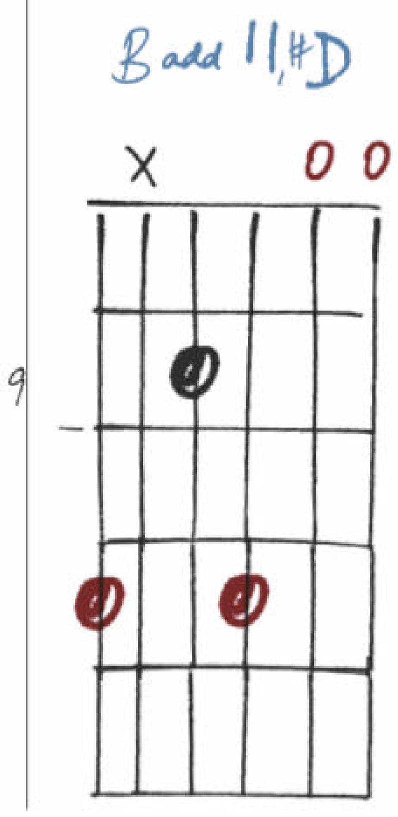
EXAMPLE #3

Moving up a further two frets, the chord becomes an A/C#, with the open B functioning as an add9. The open top E is the fifth, so we don't need to consider that when naming the chord. We are in the kind of territory Jimmy Page was exploring when he co-wrote "Ramble On" here.



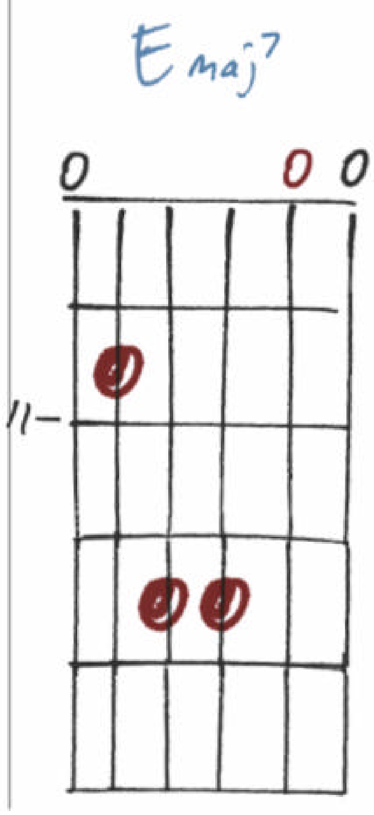
EXAMPLE #4

Shifting up yet again, we are entering more harmonically ambiguous territory – the basic B/D# shape is further enhanced by the open B string, which becomes an extra root in this context. The open top E becomes an add11, differentiated from a sus4 by the presence of the third (D#) in the bass.



EXAMPLE #5

Changing tack for a melodic resolution, this Emaj7 makes use of the sixth, second and first strings. This is another chord that can be moved to various positions on the fretboard, with a surprising variety of results. It's particularly nice on acoustic guitar – if the intonation is good enough!



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PERFECTLY FRANK

TOWARDS THE END OF LAST YEAR, A NEW DOCUMENTARY ON THE LIFE AND TIMES OF **FRANK ZAPPA** WAS PREMIERED IN THE UNITED STATES AND NOW, AFTER A FEW MONTHS' WAIT, *ZAPPA* IS AVAILABLE FOR FANS TO STREAM LOCALLY. WE GO BEHIND THE SCENES TO SPEAK ABOUT THE MAN AND HIS MUSIC WITH FORMER ZAPPA BAND GUITARISTS **STEVE VAI** AND **MIKE KENEALLY**.

WORDS BY **DAVID MEAD**.

CARVIN
CARVIN

Above: *Zappa had a knack for the production side of recording, finding particular interest in tape editing as a way to deliver interesting and unpredictable experiments in tonal manipulation. One prime example is the '69 cut "King Kong", which is chopped together from various live and studio performances.*

It was well overdue. Since Zappa's death in 1993 there has been a yawning gap where a film about his life should be, and actor/director Alex Winter found it hard to believe that nothing had been done to fill that space so far.

"It seemed striking to me that there had yet to be a definitive, all-access documentary on the life and times of Frank Zappa," he said. "We set out to make that film, to tell a story that is not a music doc, or a conventional biopic, but the dramatic saga of a great American artist and thinker – a film that would set out to convey the scope of Zappa's prodigious and varied creative output, and the breadth of his extraordinary personal life. First and foremost, I wanted to make a very human, universal cinematic experience about an extraordinary individual."

Alex was granted access to Zappa's famed vault, a multimedia archive containing more than 1,000 hours of largely unseen and unheard footage. Biographical in nature, the 129-minute film accompanies Zappa from the formative years of the original Mothers Of Invention through to his final performance on guitar in Prague in 1991. It's a rare treat and one that every Zappa fan will treasure.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Steve Vai started working for Zappa at the age of 18. In the beginning he was transcribing Zappa's music – some of which was published in *The Frank Zappa Guitar Book* (Munchkin Music, 1982). But in the autumn of 1980, he became a fully paid-up member of Zappa's recording and touring band and can still remember the level of culture shock that was to ensue...

How did you get to know Zappa?

I was so innocent and naïve. I was a kid that grew up in a teenage bedroom on Long Island listening to the progressive rock music of the '70s, but had an interest in composition from a very early age. And I discovered Frank. When I moved out to California, it was a bit of a shock. It was so exciting and so interesting. And then I got an apartment right down the street from Frank, so I was constantly in the Zappa world. A week later, I just started going up to the house and then that was it, you know?

Did you go straight into recording sessions?

Well, that's the interesting thing about Frank. When you go up to the studio and you're a musician and there's something that you can do that he finds useful in his music, you just start recording all sorts of things. Then records start coming out and sometimes they're not necessarily in the order that you worked on things.

So, for instance, when I first started going up to the house, Frank had me recording a few pieces of music that were extremely difficult. One of them was *Theme From The 3rd Movement Of Sinister Footwear*. Then the first album I started to record with Frank was *You Are What You Is*. I was all over that record and I thought, "Well, great, that's going to be the next record that comes out." But the next record that actually came out was *Tinseltown Rebellion*, which was from the first fall 1980 tour that I did. And then *You Are What You Is* came out after that. So you just never knew with Frank.

He was renowned for being very tough in the rehearsal room. Did you experience that?

The level of excellence that you needed to be at was such that if you didn't have the goods, you didn't last. And Frank expected everybody to rise to the occasion. One of the brilliant things about Frank was he had the ability to totally intuitively read your potential. And each musician that he hired for his band had to have something that they could do that was somewhat extraordinary. You had to be a great singer or a great player, whatever it was that you did. That's what he expected from you. He wouldn't expect you to do things that you couldn't do because that wouldn't work for him. So it didn't work for you. So 'tough' is an interesting word to apply to Frank. He was demanding, but he didn't demand things that you couldn't do.

Personally, what do you feel he drew out of you as a musician?

Well, first I transcribed his music so he put me in really deep, transcribing all these abstract guitar solos and drum parts for him. For some reason, this was something that was just very organic for me. And then, as far as playing obtuse melodies on the guitar that aren't very natural for conventional guitar players, I was pretty good at that because in my mind I loved the idea of playing things that were very, very difficult – and Frank had a boatload of that stuff. So he would write music for an instrument like the piano that wouldn't fall on the guitar in any natural way, but I somehow figured out ways to play it.

One of the things I was able to do, which I think Frank was able to take advantage of, was play some of those very difficult melodies that in the past he didn't have guitar players play."

You played on possibly the most technically difficult of all Zappa's pieces, "The Black Page", earning you the title of 'stunt guitarist' in the band.

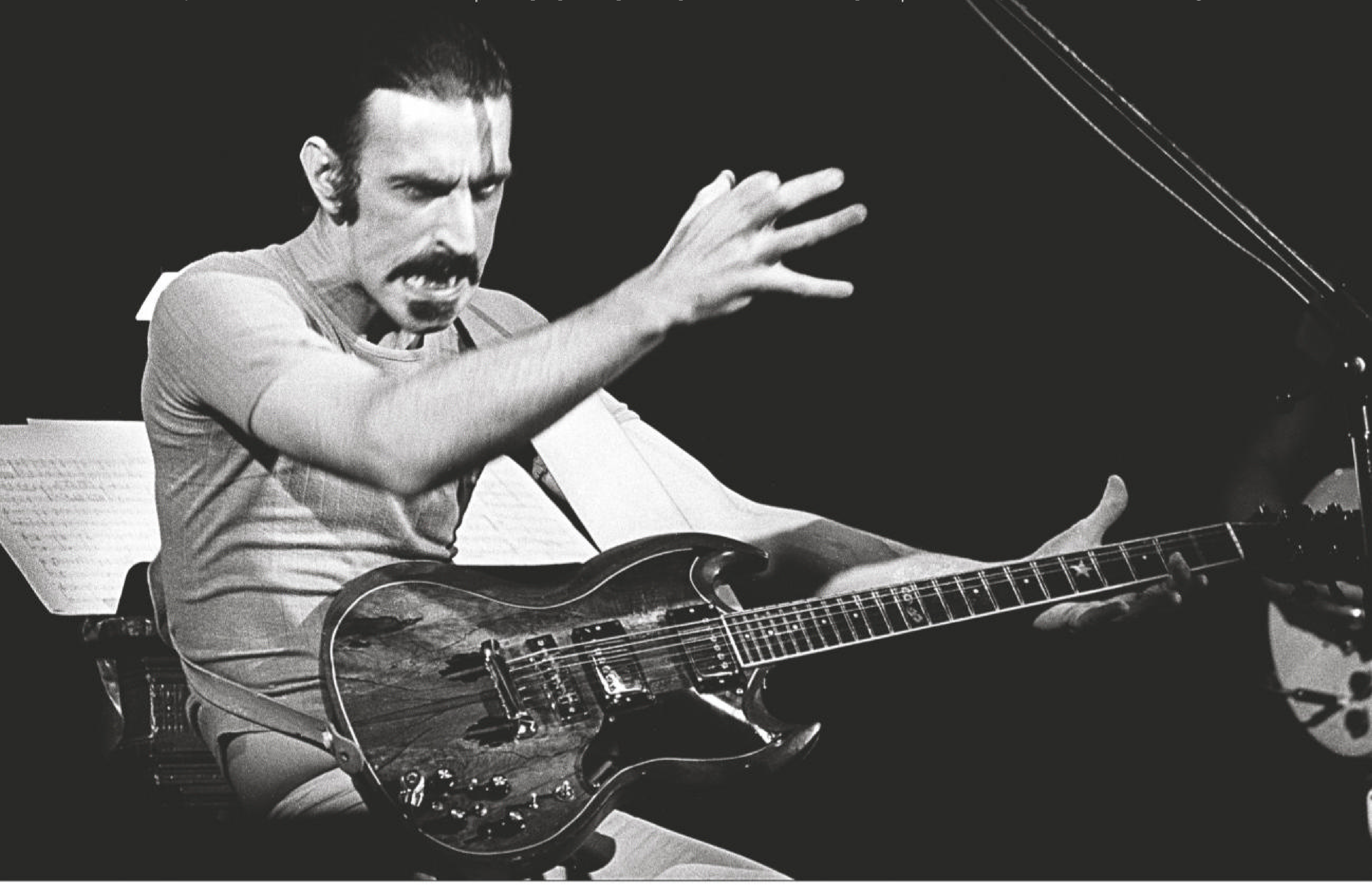
I think he was just interested to see how far he could take me with playing crazy stuff on the guitar. But the things that I did with him that I think he got the biggest kick out of was "The Jazz Discharge Party Hats" or "The Dangerous Kitchen" or "Moggio" or "RDNZL" or "Drowning Witch". These are all pieces of music that just had an uncanny type of guitar expectations.

Is there a moment on stage that will stay with you for ever, during your time touring with Frank?

There are so many. The first show of the tour I did with Frank in 1980, he'd never really had somebody playing these types of melodies on the guitar. He had given me the melody to this song, "Montana", and now you get guys like Mike Keneally and Dweezil [Zappa] and that's a piece of cake. It's not a problem for these guys, but back then nobody was doing that stuff.

And I've seen Frank in a bad mood. If he heard one mistake, one tiny little mistake, something he didn't like, he threw the whole song out. And if it's the same person who made the mistake more than two times in a row, they were thrown out of the band.

Well, we play "Montana" and there's that interlude in the middle and I just nailed it, you know? I just freakin' nailed it. And he stopped the show, walks up to me in front of the audience and he says to the mic, "Not bad, sport." And then we kick in again. Now, I've



__Left:__ Before he was a soloing virtuoso, Zappa played drums in Lancaster-local R&B group The Blackouts. The band also featured legendary saxophonist Jim 'Motorhead' Sherwood, who would later join Zappa's first full-on rock band, the Mothers Of Invention.

seen him stop the band for other reasons that weren't as friendly as that, trust me. So that was a surprise.

SPIRIT OF '88

It's amazing to think that the guitar isn't Mike Keneally's first instrument. He originally approached Zappa to audition for keyboards, but finding that role already filled he decided to go for the guitar position instead. Having proved to Frank that he could handle the most complex music thrown his way, Mike joined Zappa's band for the 1988 tour.

When you first started the tour, how did you manage the leap from keyboard to guitar?

I quickly had get up to speed. It's not just executing notes on an instrument, which was kind of the way I approached it at the time, because as a keyboardist initially, I sort of conceptualise the fretboard as just like a different version of a keyboard. So for me to play guitar with Frank at that time was like 90 percent about executing parts and not really getting into the way personality can be conveyed with a guitar. If you listen to what I play on those on those live recordings from 1988, it's much more about being an ensemble member.

Another startling fact about your tenure with Zappa was that it was your first pro gig.

I had done such a small amount of playing with large bands, or any kind of live playing on a large scale at all, I had to come to terms with everything at once. So if I could just cut the parts in some form on the guitar, I consider that a success. If it were possible to go back and do those shows again with some portion of the knowledge I have now about guitar playing specifically, things would come off differently but not necessarily better!

Your in-depth knowledge of Zappa's back catalogue proved to be invaluable during rehearsals, didn't it?

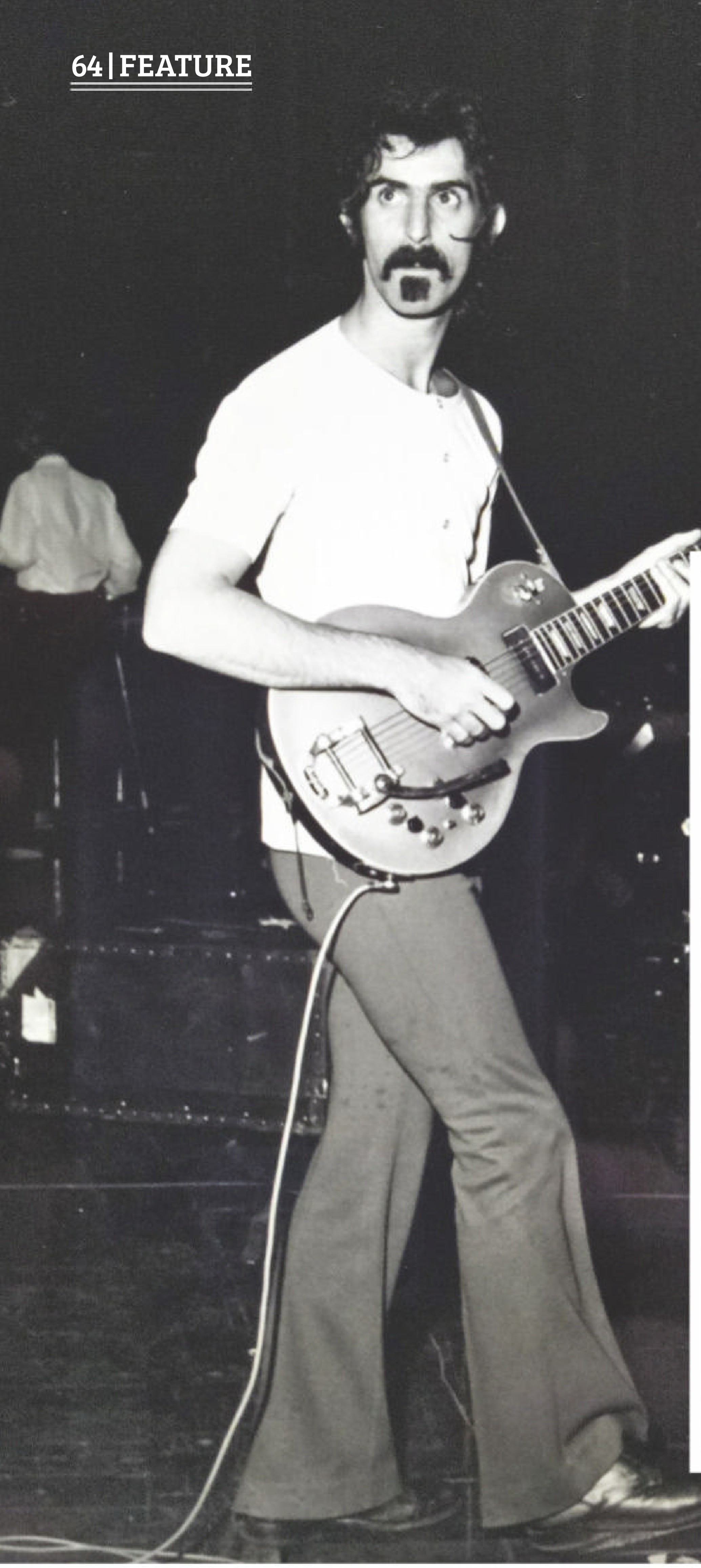
If Frank wanted to play some song that he hadn't played in a long time, he might say, "We haven't played 'Who Needs The Peace Corps?' for 20 years," and then he would just turn and look at me and I'd start playing it. So the fact that I was able to provide that service I think is more valuable to what was accomplished on that tour musically than anything specifically about guitar. Although I got lucky on occasion with some of the guitar playing. There are some nice moments on the [live] albums, but it's certainly nothing compared to what Steve [Vai] had going on in terms of the impact that he made as a guitarist.

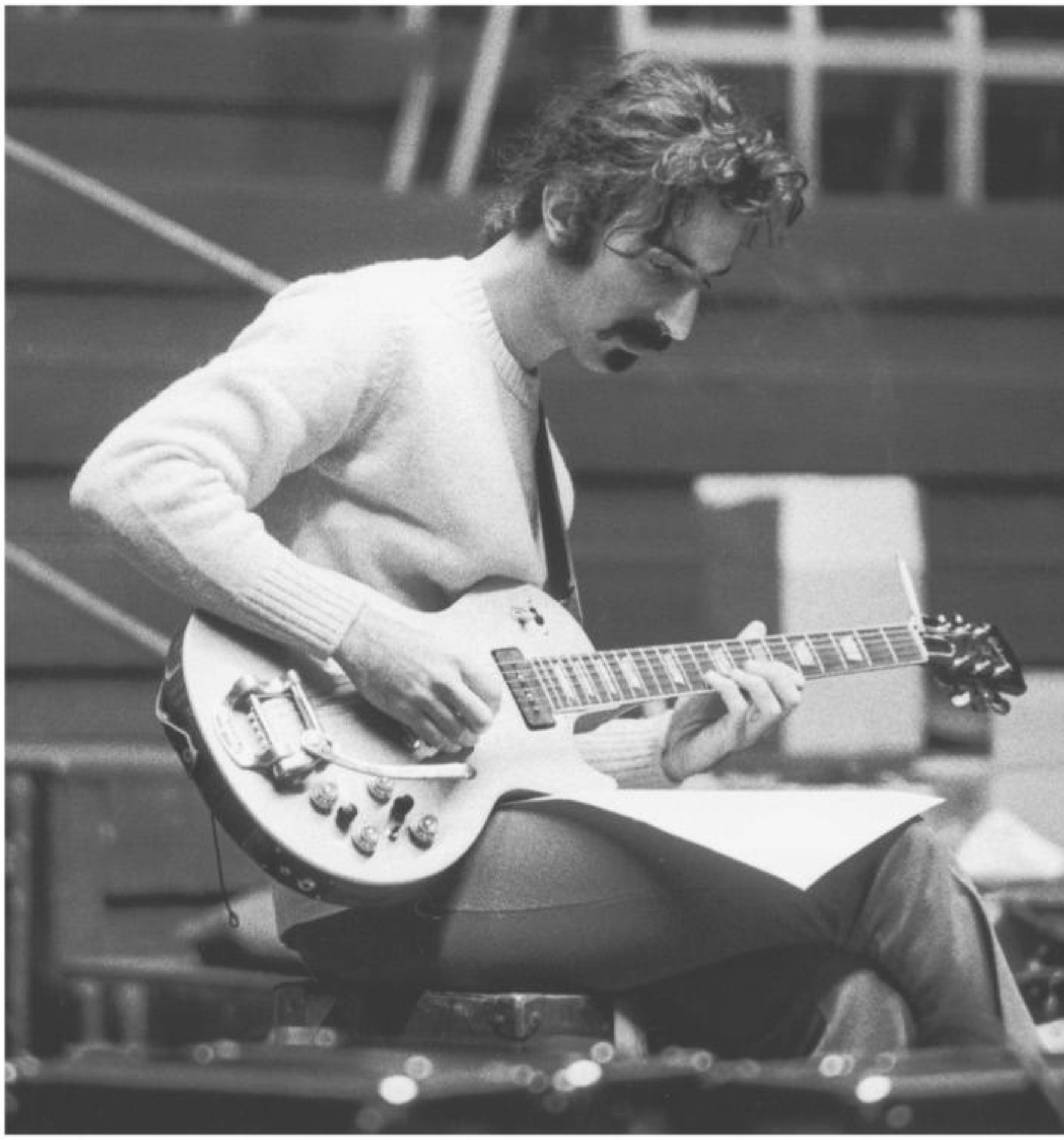
> **"I PERSONALLY COULDN'T IMAGINE ANYTHING THAT I WOULD RATHER SPEND THE DAY DOING THAN PLAYING ZAPPA MUSIC. I CAME FROM MORE OF A FAN PERSPECTIVE THAN A LOT OF THE GUYS IN THE BAND WOULD GET..."**

Zappa was famous for a putting his bands through a punishing pre-tour rehearsal schedule. What was that like?

Heaven! Because I personally couldn't imagine anything that I would rather spend the day doing than playing Zappa music. You've got to realise that I came from more of a fan perspective than a lot of guys who would get in the band, where it really would just be tiring grunt work. But not only was I a huge Zappa fan, it was also my first professional music experience of any kind. So my mind was being blown on a daily basis, eight hours a day, five days a week for four months of pretty much sustained bliss.

33 years later, I can look back and understand why somebody might get fatigued. I'm a lot more sympathetic to that, but I still think, 'You know what? What a blessed situation to be in,' and that overrides





anything else. There aren't that many times in life where you can say, "I'm in rehearsal with Frank Zappa, playing his music."

What was the most demanding piece that you had to learn for the '88 tour?

The first one that comes to mind is "Alien Orifice" because there's a long patch in the middle that actually wasn't even played by guitar on the original recording, but Frank decided he wanted to change up the orchestration. It was just a barrage of fast 16th notes and he wanted it to be clean, bassy-sounding guitar, played along with the vibraphone and piano. So I just had to learn this thing and it is the type of part that you just have to drill it and drill it and drill it, and you can't afford to think about it. It has to be complete muscle memory. Giving an ounce of energy to what the next note is supposed to be, you're going to lose it.

Bob Rice, who was the Synclavier tech on that tour, would keep a running tally on my executions of that song and any time I did okay, he would come up after the show and go, "Nice 'Alien'." That was the only thing that was in the back of my mind: trying to elicit a "nice 'Alien'" from Bob Rice after the show."

How did the experience of such intense rehearsing translate into actually getting on tour and playing the material live?

There were certain songs that we drilled constantly while we were rehearsing in Los Angeles. I'm thinking in particular of a song called "Jezebel Boy", which is not anything that requires rehearsal except for the fact that it involved a certain amount of improvised vocal stuff. And I think Frank just liked playing it. We'd get back from dinner break and Frank would say, "Jezebel Boy", just because he enjoyed it. He and I could get into different improvised stuff every time we played it.

On the road, we played it one time. We fucked it up. And that's the version that's on *Broadway The Hard Way*, because it was the only version that Frank had to choose from. But I just thought, "How strange that we played this song relentlessly in rehearsal."

What would be your most memorable moment from the tour?

I used to dream of playing in Frank's band, so the fact that it was finally happening, I opted to just be grateful for it. The night before the tour started, I was panicking because I'd never done anything like it. I was home, unable to sleep, thinking that even though I'd just rehearsed for four months, I didn't feel like I belonged – I felt unworthy somehow.

Frank may have sensed something about what I was going through because on the first show in Albany, New York, he kept going to me in the second set and having me do things, improvise on guitar and vocal and keyboard simultaneously, you know, all this stuff. And when we came out for the encore Frank says, "Mike Keneally, ladies and gentlemen!" and I was feeling like I belonged there and apparently Frank felt the same way, so I felt really validated from that moment and for the rest of the tour I just relished every opportunity to perform.

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The VOX Bobcat and Lynx semi-hollow body guitars were produced in the mid-‘60s with unusual pickup configurations and a distinct look, which we’ve revived in the new Bobcat V90 and S66. We’ve kept the historic design, but brought them up to date with improved playability for today’s players — controlling acoustic feedback, and raising the performance of the pickups.

The Lynx-inspired V90 is equipped with two soapbar-style pickups, while the S66 Bobcat reissue is equipped with three single-coil pickups and an independent volume control for the middle pickup so you can blend your tones, setting Bobcat apart from other semi-hollow models on the market.

Newly added to the range are the ‘Bobcat with Bigsby’ models which include a Bigsby B700 (Jet Black) or B70 (Chrome) bridge, while the standard Bobcat models feature fixed Tune-o-matic type bridges with trapeze tailpieces for easy string changes.

All models share a Maple ply top & body, with a weight-relieved, feedback-reducing Spruce centre block and a Mahogany set-neck with Indonesian Ebony fretboard. Aluminium knobs and open-gear Grover tuning heads add to the package that’s full of retro style with modern innovation.

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BLOOD AND SHOEGAZE

MY BLOODY VALENTINE CHANGED THE SOUND OF GUITAR PLAYING FOREVER. HERE, WE'LL TAKE A DEEP DIVE INTO THE FORCES BEHIND MBV'S FORMIDABLE SHOEGAZE APPROACH, AND HOW THEIR PIONEERING TAKE ON THE ELECTRIC GUITAR CHANGED THE FUTURE OF THE INSTRUMENT.

WORDS BY **ALEX LYNHAM**.

My Bloody Valentine are the ultimate '90s cult guitar band. They helped define a genre – shoegaze – before transcending it, then disappearing for 20 years. Though their influence remained, their records were so out-of-fashion that they were impossible to find until eBay came along.

By the time of their seminal album *Loveless*, their approach to the guitar was completely iconoclastic. Led by the mercurial Kevin Shields, alongside co-guitarist Bilinda Butcher, they developed a way of playing the guitar that had a lot more to do with atmosphere and sound design than just simple riffs or chord progressions. Saying that, however, they had some great hooks – the monolithic power chords of "Only Shallow", legato whammy lines of "I Only Said", or reverb-drenched main riff of "Come In Alone", for starters.

The group went the long way around to find their signature sound, however. After a number of early EPs, the band caught the attention of Creation Records, who put them in the studio to record an EP – *You Made Me Realise*. During the sessions for this EP, Kevin Shields was lent a Fender Jazzmaster, and started experimenting with the tremolo arm. This, combined with a new habit of smoking cannabis, led to him discovering a new way of combining de-tuned bends with reverse reverb. The track "Thorn" was the first to be recorded this way, but it's "Slow" that has the best example of what would become his signature 'glide' guitar tone.

Between 1988's *Isn't Anything* and 1991's seminal *Loveless*, their sound took a quantum leap. Interest in the band was greater, the budget was bigger, and the drugs they were taking had changed. Like others in the contemporary scene, they had discovered ecstasy, and this would have as much of an impact on the sound of the record as the whammy pedal or Jazzmaster, driving the sound design to new, euphoric heights.

Anyway, enough history. To celebrate the band finally releasing their entire catalog on streaming services, here are just a few of the band's coolest contributions to the sound of guitar playing, according to us...

my bloody valentine

1 USING THE JAZZMASTER TREMOLO ARM TO "GLIDE"

MBV's signature guitar sound relies on bending played notes down while strumming, and allowing reverb to turn this into a gauzy, deep vibrato. The more subtle de-tuning action of the Fender Jazzmaster allows for this effect to happen, where other tremolo systems result in a much more dramatic de-tuning. Shields has described this as being like an "infinite horizon", and something that the band were using to try and induce a trance state, but it's completely absent from their earliest material.

The reason? Simple, really – he didn't have access to a Jazzmaster until 1988, when Bill Carey lent him one during the sessions for *You Made Me Realise*. The Jazzmaster ended up assuming a starring role on the cover of *Loveless* – and the rest is history.

THE EQUIPMENT

- Red Fender 1964 Jazzmaster

2 TRANSFORMING GUITAR SOUNDS WITH REVERSE REVERB

Shields' signature "glide guitar" technique wouldn't work without a reverse reverb, which transformed regular guitar playing into something altogether more hypnotic, and even transcendent. MBV's weapons of choice were rack-based, and there was a time when you could pick up a Midiverb in decent condition for the equivalent of about $50, but prices have gradually climbed in the last couple of years. Whether that's because of increasing interest in the sounds of MBV, or because supply has decreased as old units have broken down, we don't know.

In any case, the reverse reverb of this otherwise quite limited rack reverb became a part of MBV's signature sound. For a slightly different rack unit, the Alesis Quadraverb+ was a staple of Verve guitarist Nick McCabe's rack, and crops up on a lot of other shoegaze and dream pop records, while prices of the Yamaha SPX90 haven't shot up as much. Of course, many of today's modern reverb pedals offer a reverse setting, while Keeley Electronics even dedicated an entire pedal, the Loomer, to Shields' signature sound.

THE EQUIPMENT

- Alesis Midiverb II
- Yamaha SPX-90

3 TAKING THE WHAMMY IN NEW DIRECTIONS

Whether it's the screaming oscillation from the main riff of "Only Shallow", or the lead guitars from "I Only Said", many signature guitar parts and textures from *Loveless* leaned heavily on this then-new pitch-shifting pedal. The whammy as a textural device was a very different way of using the pedal from other early innovators like Rage Against the Machine's Tom Morello.

Other noise guitarists, like Ichiro Agata of Melt Banana, have taken the pedal in similar sonic directions, but *Loveless* remains the pinnacle of this shoegazing approach. The intro of "Only Shallow" was reportedly recorded with a mic placed between two amps. This suggests that Shields was using the whammy in combination with the Boss PN-2 Tremolo/Pan to generate the stuttering, screaming lead part.

THE EQUIPMENT

- DigiTech Whammy

4 OVERDUBBING TO EXTREME

Kevin has said in interviews that he tends to leave a Jazzmaster in every alternate tuning that's used for an MBV track, and many of their songs are in exotic tunings. By altering voices and layering guitars, you get many of the mind-altering textures found on *Loveless*. Another key is the register and timbre of each sound. Some are layered with different distortions and the whammy to heighten the gauzy, woozy thickness of the mix. On tracks like "Sometimes", there's an acoustic guitar layered into the mix to add transients and attack – a percussive, hypnotic effect that is accentuated by the lack of drums.

It's worth also saying that this penchant for overdubs — and in some cases, as much the exaggerated version peddled by the music press as the reality – influenced other bands and producers to try more dense mixes. Perhaps the most famous records to take this mentality to its logical conclusion were the Smashing Pumpkins' commercial smashes *Siamese Dream* and *Mellon Collie And The Infinite Sadness*.

THE EQUIPMENT

- Fender Jazzmaster
- DigiTech Whammy
- Various acoustic guitars
- Various distortions and fuzzes

5 BUILDING OUTRAGEOUSLY ENORMOUS PEDALBOARDS

The "shoegaze" moniker came about because the early bands in the scene were supposedly more interested in looking at their pedals than at the audience, so it's no surprise that MBV were pedal-obsessed. In the BBC documentary *The Joy Of The Guitar Riff*, Shields remarks offhand that he must have "a good few hundred" pedals, with most being "various types of distortion". In pictures of Kevin's post-reunion rigs, on some it looks like there could well be a hundred distortions.

What's interesting, however, is that, based on eyewitness accounts of the band's early live shows, his original rig was often a lot smaller, with some staples like a Marshall Shredmaster, dual Boss PN-2 Tremolo/Pan pedals and, of course, the DigiTech Whammy.

THE EQUIPMENT

- Marshall Shredmaster
- Tonebender
- Devi Ever Godzilla
- Many, many others

INSIDE THE MIND OF A MASTER BUILDER

FENDER HAVE UNVEILED THEIR BOUNDARY-BREAKING PRESTIGE SERIES FOR 2021, STARRING AN ABSOLUTELY JAW-DROPPING, ONE-OF-A-KIND BURLED REDWOOD STRATOCASTER BY VISIONARY MASTER BUILDER **KYLE MCMILLIN**. *AUSTRALIAN GUITAR* GETS DOWN TO THE WIRE WITH THIS RENOWNED CUSTOM SHOP ARTISAN TO LEARN ALL ABOUT HIS LATEST PSYCHEDELIC WORK OF ART.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTOS COURTESY OF **KYLE MCMILLIN** VIA INSTAGRAM – **@KYLE_MCMILLIN83**.

For any guitarist worth their callouses, by and far, the most important thing is how an axe plays – some of the world best licks and most soaring solos were hashed out on kit that, had it not been in the hands of riff royalty, you'd assume was plucked from a dumpster. That being said, you have to admit, there's something pretty damn special about the moment when you look a guitar and simply think, *"Wow."*

Such is the crux of Fender's annual Prestige Collection, where the Master Builders that occupy the Californian giant's Custom Shop – legendary luthiers with artistic vision only rivalled by their handiwork in caliber – get an unrestricted opportunity let their imaginations run wild. Highlighting the team's idiosyncratic creativity and craftsmanship, the Prestige Collection has – over almost a decade of delivering timeless, one-of-a-kind masterpieces in boutique lutherie – earned the Fender Custom Shop its nickname of 'the Dream Factory'.

Standing out amongst the 2021 slate is Kyle McMillin's trippy Stratocaster, which alongside gold hardware and tortoise shell plating, a beautiful African blackwood fingerboard and Curtis Novak's bespoke GTX humbuckers, stands out with its bookmatched top blending burled redwood and opalescent blue-green resin. Drawing inspiration primarily from boutique furniture, McMillin's Strat is easily the classiest looking axe of the bunch.

If you'd like to get your hands on one… Well, you can't. Sorry. Like all of the pieces in Fender's Prestige Collection, McMillin's Strat was painstakingly handcrafted as a truly unique work of art – and it was snapped up in record time by the UK's Guitar Guitar shop. But you can still admire the beauty and badassness of this scintillating Strat, and learn a little about how it came to life in our one-on-one interview with McMillin himself…

Where did the idea for this guitar come from?

I got the idea and the inspiration from Instagram. I'm always digging through Instagram for new ideas – something different to what you would typically see every day – and I kept coming across these pieces of furniture and these art pieces that people would put on their counters or walls or whatnot, just for show. One of the things I saw was someone who'd taken this rustic piece of wood from the edge of a tree, with the bark on the side, they had it flat-sawn on the table and put a bunch of blue epoxy resin over it, layered it with different shades, and then put some white down and took a heat gun to it to make it look like natural waves.

When Fender came to you and said, "There are no limits to what you can do with this guitar," did your mind just start racing with all the possibilities you could explore?

Yeah. We get the opportunity to do stuff like this every year, so year 'round I'm always trying to think of something we can do [for the Prestige Series]. Sometimes the challenge is outdoing yourself – every time I do a guitar like this, I'm like, "Wow, how am I going to beat this?" Last year was my Winery Vineyard Tele, and that was just really nice… I wish I could keep these guitars, y'know? They're really nuts, and they sound great… The hardest part is definitely letting go.

So what drew you to burled redwood for this year's Stratocaster?

Well, I didn't necessarily pick the wood out for tone. We acquired some thin body tops that weren't glued together yet – they were about three eights of an inch thick – and we got them from someone at the NAMM show. They happened to be burled redwood,

and we happened to have some bluish-green resin on hand, and they seemed a really good fit together. I wasn't able to pour the resin myself due to a lack of time, but I do want to start pouring it myself in the future, and have full creativity of how it's going to look; maybe utilise some other techniques with it that aren't in this one, kind of step it up a little bit.

How does it sound?

Oh, it sounds great! I was just playing it before I came in here [*laughs*]. It's really cool, yeah.

How many revisions will a project's concept go through? Is the finished Strat very close to what you had envisioned?

I think so. It's kind of hard to remember because I work on these guitars year-round. I probably was thinking about this a year and a half ago, so it's pretty hard to remember all the details. But they're never 100 percent what I first imagine – sometimes I get some more inspiration as I go, or I'll see something and be like, "Oh, I obviously need to add that!" Like the pickups that were in it – that wasn't in my original plan, but I had seen the open-cover pickups that Curtis Novak did and I thought, "Y'know let me give him a call and see what we could do." And we came up with something that complimented the burled redwood and the resin.

Do you follow the same sort of creation process for each guitar you build?

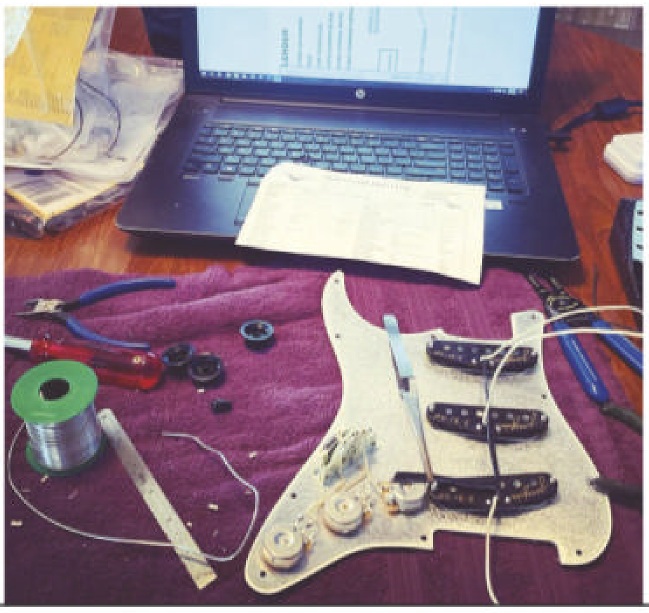
It varies between each guitar. It always starts off in your brain, thinking up ideas, and then the approach and the process differ with every project.

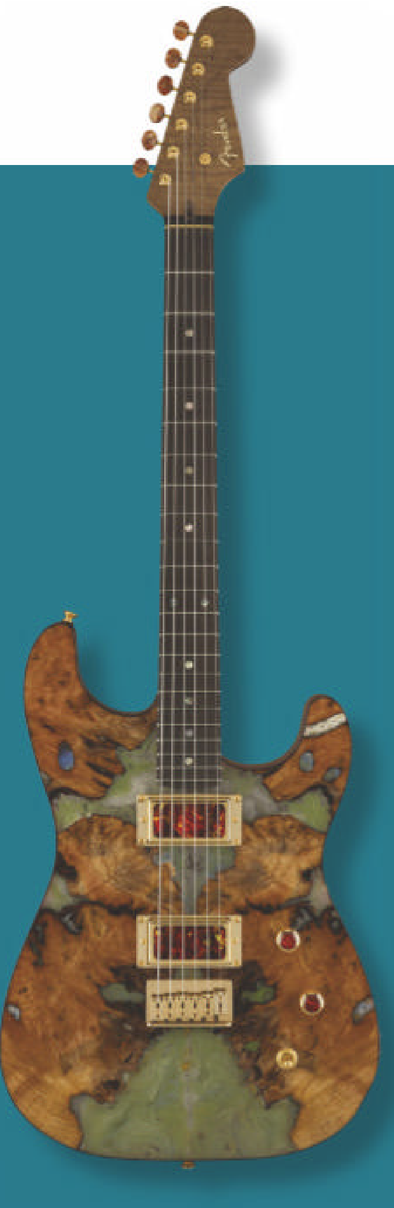
Do you have a favourite part of the process?

Yeah, it's a toss-up between the design and the actual woodwork. When I first got into guitars, I'd get a roll of parchment paper from the grocery store and I would draw two separate sketches – one would be the centreline, looking straight at the guitar, and the other would be the guitar string, and I'd just kind of engineer it from the string down, then from the front view – and I always had fun doing that. Now, many years into this, I do it all on cat programs, and that's fun – that's the part I like the most.

So what's next for you?

Oh, I've got all kinds of ideas! It's hard to figure out which one I'm going to pull out next; there's one idea I've had in my head for well over a year, and I'm trying to figure out how to accomplish it... Maybe that'll be the next Prestige, but for now it's a secret.





SPEC IT OUT

Fender Prestige Series Custom Burled Redwood Stratocaster

- **Colour:** Natural
- **Body Material:** Roasted Ash
- **Body Finish:** Urethane
- **Body Top:** Redwood Burl
- **Neck Material:** Roasted AAAA Flame Maple
- **Neck Shape:** Modern C
- **Scale Length:** 25.5 inches
- **Fingerboard Radius:** 9.5 inches
- **Frets:** 22
- **Fret Size:** Medium Jumbo
- **String Nut:** Polished Brass
- **Nut Width:** 1.65 inches
- **Truss Rod Nut:** 1/8-inch Hex Adjustment
- **Neck Plate:** Four-Bolt with Master Builder Signature
- **Neck Finish:** Gloss Urethane
- **Fingerboard:** African Blackwood
- **Position Inlays:** Abalone Dot
- **Bridge Pickup:** Novak GTX-HMB with Tortoiseshell Cover
- **Neck Pickup:** Novak GTX-HMB with Tortoiseshell Cover
- **Controls:** Master Volume, Master Tone
- **Pickup Switching:** 5-Position Blade – Position 1: Bridge Pickup, Position 2: Bridge and Middle Pickup, Position 3: Middle Pickup, Position 4: Middle and Neck Pickup, Position 5: Neck Pickup
- **Pickup Configuration:** HH
- **Bridge:** Six-Saddle Hardtail with Cast Saddles
- **Tuning Machines:** Vintage-Style with Fender Logo, Tortoiseshell Buttons
- **Hardware Finish:** Gold-Plated
- **Pickguard:** None
- **Control Knobs:** Knurled Gold with Tortoiseshell Top
- **Switch Tips:** Aged White
- **Strings:** Nickel Plated Steel (.010-.046 Gauges)

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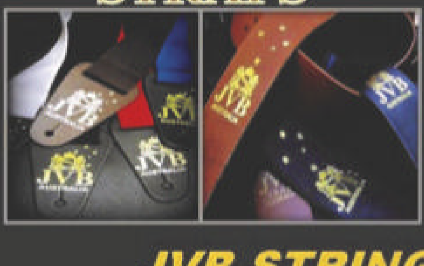

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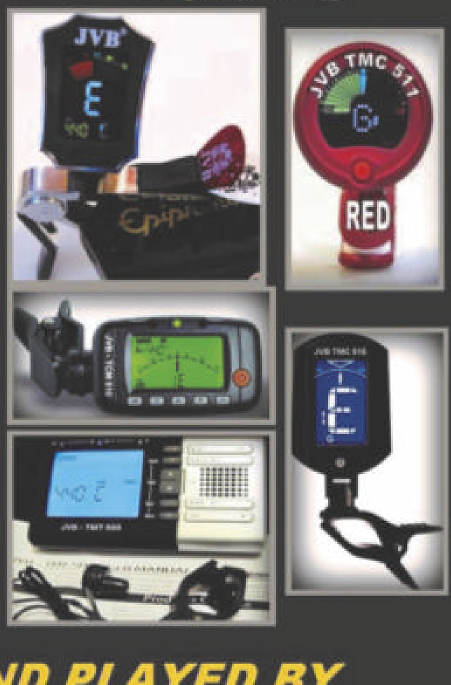

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GIBSON TO THE RESCUE!

GIBSON'S HEAD OF PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT, **MAT KOEHLER**, RECANTS THE STORY OF A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN THE GUITAR GIANT'S HISTORY: WHEN THEY SAVED EPIPHONE FROM THE BRINK OF COLLAPSE IN THE LATE '50S.

WORDS BY **ROD BRAKES**.

During rock 'n' roll's fledgling years of the 1950s, Gibson was riding the wave of the electric guitar boom while Epiphone's once-feted archtops became dead in the water. Whereas Gibson flourished in the post-war years following its acquisition by Chicago Musical Instruments (CMI) in 1944 and the subsequent appointment of Ted McCarty as CEO in 1948, Epiphone embarked on a long, slow decline following the death of its visionary founder, Epi Stathopoulo, in 1943.

Along with infighting, unionisation problems and a partial relocation to Philadelphia in 1953, the House of Stathopoulo (as it was previously known) stood divided. The once-proud brand, Epiphone Inc. of New York – Gibson's fiercest competitor in the revolutionary pre-war archtop era – was now a spent force. Save for one thing: it still built some of the best upright basses in the industry.

Despite its troubles, Epiphone managed to sustain an enviable reputation as a quality builder of upright basses, or 'bass viols' as they were often called – an avenue Gibson wished to further explore in the '50s while competing against Fender's game-changing Precision Bass.

Ted McCarty was so impressed with the instruments that he suggested to Epiphone's president, Orphie Stathopoulo, that if ever he decided to sell the bass business, he should give Ted a call. The seed was planted in Orphie's mind, and in the spring of 1957, he did just that. After years of struggling to stay afloat and with morale at an all-time low, he eventually keeled over and reached out to Ted for a lifeline. With more than 80 years in the American instrument-building business, the Stathopoulo family were finally bowing out.

"Looking through our archives, my favourite topic of all is Epiphone," begins Gibson's head of product development, Mat Koehler. "When I see this stuff, I realise what a creative boom it was at the time, and we're witnessing a renaissance of Epiphone right now. The Epiphone stuff really gets me going. We have memos from April 1957, when Ted McCarty sent his right-hand man, John Huis, and Ward Arbanas on a reconnaissance mission to Epiphone. Ward would soon head up the project and become the [production manager] of Epiphone, Kalamazoo.

"The mission wasn't necessarily to snoop on Epiphone – it was about gauging the opportunity to purchase its upright bass business. John and Ward reported back that [Gibson] was very well equipped to be making upright basses. Ted then contacted Orphie Stathopoulo with an offer of $20,000, which he accepted right away."

While the Gibson team was busy organising transportation of the basses along with associated parts and machinery from Epiphone's New York and Philadelphia sites to its Kalamazoo factory, John Huis suddenly realised Epiphone wasn't just packing up the bass business.

"They were gathering up everything: basses, guitar bodies, necks, pickups – they were clearing out," continues Koehler. "[Gibson] quickly became concerned about Orphie realising they may not have intended to buy everything for $20,000. John sent a hurried telegraph to Ted saying, 'They think we're buying everything: guitars, amplifiers, you name it – they've pulled everything out for us to ship to Kalamazoo,' and then Ted changed course and alerted his lawyers saying, 'We need to make this happen ASAP because this opportunity is too good to pass up.' It was all orchestrated by Ted, and once everything was on the move, CMI set up Epiphone Inc. of Kalamazoo.

"There's a letter from Orphie dated 'March 29, 1957' where he talks about Epiphone's inventory, which was done in the previous November. Tongue in cheek, he says, 'The inventory hasn't changed since then,' basically insinuating that sales were

stagnant. Its main problem was it didn't have any product direction. Gibson also floundered a little bit before '57 and '58, but Epiphone did not have solidbody guitars. There wasn't much in the way of forward-thinking designs.

"You could argue the same for Gibson with respect to basses; while Fender were busy creating the industry standard in electric bass, Gibson were still thinking there was a real opportunity with upright basses. But, interestingly, that's how Gibson were able to acquire their former competitor."

Although Gibson's ambition to produce a successful line of upright basses was never fulfilled (its attempts had ceased by 1961), the large influx of Epiphone guitar parts inspired a radical change of direction.

"Around early to mid-1957, it became apparent they were going to be getting everything from Epiphone and [Gibson] immediately came up with the idea to create an entire product line – but not just basses," clarifies Koehler. "They had already worked out what basses they wanted right off the bat, and now they were scrambling to come up with an entire product line of guitars. They were trying to make the most of the spare parts. [Gibson's] parent company, CMI, in Chicago said, 'Send us a product portfolio. What does the price list look like?'

"Some of the names and prices were modified, but it was approved. And they consulted with Clarence Havenga, the sales manager, who said, 'Here's your in: if you come up with a product line, we can sell them in stores where we previously denied them the Gibson line because they are too close to an existing dealer.'"

With a plan in place and CMI keen to make progress, Ted McCarty whipped his team into action ahead of the rapidly approaching July 1958 NAMM Show in Chicago where the new line of Epiphone guitars was to be unveiled.

"The guitars were concepted in the early part of 1958," Koehler tells us, "and in May, Ted McCarty felt compelled to send a memo with words to the effect of, 'If anybody has a problem building a guitar with Epiphone on the headstock then see me because we need this done immediately – any delay will result in serious consequences.' There was so much going on at the time and Gibson were creating their own new models. The July 1958 NAMM Show in Chicago was

epic. Epiphone had their own room – number 729 – at Palmer House. Their order book was not earth shattering right after NAMM, but in a letter Ward sent to Ted recounting the event, he made a note that Forrest White from Fender stopped by to offer his "congratulations on the nice-looking instruments". Ward thought they did pretty good.

"My favourite Epiphone story concerns the fabled Moderne. The name Moderne probably originated from that [1957 Gibson Modernistic series] patent drawing, but by the time they were submitting their ideas for Epiphone, they felt the most viable use of that name would be for the double-cutaway [Epiphone solidbodies]. Looking at this memo in front me, it appears there are two Modernes, both with poplar bodies – which is very unusual, although that does tie in with some other Ted McCarty blueprints and drawings I've found that mention poplar. It says, 'poplar body, black finish, nickel hardware, single pickup and wrap[around] tailpiece'.

"Clearly, that's referring to the Coronet, but it's called the Moderne. And then they've got the Moderne Deluxe. That also specifies a poplar body but with 'dual pickups, gold hardware, Sunburst finish and wrap[around] tailpiece', and that's what becomes the Crestwood. To me, the slab-bodied Coronet is one of the coolest models of all time. It hasn't yet got its due."

As the new Epiphone guitars began to catch on, sales steadily crept up in the early '60s (comprising around 10 percent of Kalamazoo's output of instruments by 1961) and the team continued to refine the brand's identity, notably with the introduction of the mini-humbucker – a dual-coil pickup derived from Seth Lover's original humbucker design.

"EPIPHONE PRODUCED SOME REALLY COOL IDEAS BACK IN THE DAY; WE'RE SITTING ON A CACHE OF BLUEPRINTS AND FILE DESIGNS FOR ITEMS THAT WERE NEVER EVEN CREATED..."

"The reasons for the mini-humbucker are twofold," highlights Koehler. "One, they were looking at what they would use on Epiphone guitars when they ran out of the old stock of 'New York' pickups; and two, they were already developing pickups for Silvertone, specifically the Chris Isaak 1446L model. We've found Seth Lover's unit cover blueprints – one for Silvertone and one for Epiphone – and they are both dated within the same time frame [spring 1961].

"This blueprint was just for the unit covers, so they had probably developed the whole strategy by then. Functionally, they are the same, but the design differs slightly. They knew they wanted something unique for Epiphone, plus it was more or less the same form factor as the New Yorker pickup. I'd say Epiphone was a more focused product line than Gibson because they had the opportunity to start afresh. And it was apparent that they had a better strategy: Coronet, Wilshire, Crestwood; Casino, Riviera, Sheraton; Texan, Frontier, Excellente.

"It was really important to the guys that worked on these concepts – particularly Ward Arbanas, [demonstrator] Andy Nelson and [chief engineer] Larry Allers – that the price differences were justified visually. The Epiphone guitars sometimes looked a little bit fancier then the Gibson high-end models. The Epiphone Riviera was actually more expensive than its Gibson equivalent, the ES-335. I've heard old-timers say that Epiphone was almost considered like a custom shop – an elite team of skilled workers and designers with top sales feedback. They knew what they wanted, and they did their best to execute it."

While looking to improve its products, feedback from the sales department was considered crucial; those suggestions and requests from customers and dealers directly influenced the evolution of Epiphone guitars.

"Andy Nelson was the main consultant for Epiphone out in the field," says Koehler. "He was the guy in the stores giving the clinics because he was a world-class guitarist. He would hear from dealers and players that would say things like, 'I could really do with a skinnier neck with a narrower nut width.'

That's the kind of feedback that instigated a lot of the changes in the product line. Epiphone did those changes at least a year ahead of Gibson. Epiphone were moving to the narrower nut width and slimmer necks as early as 1963.

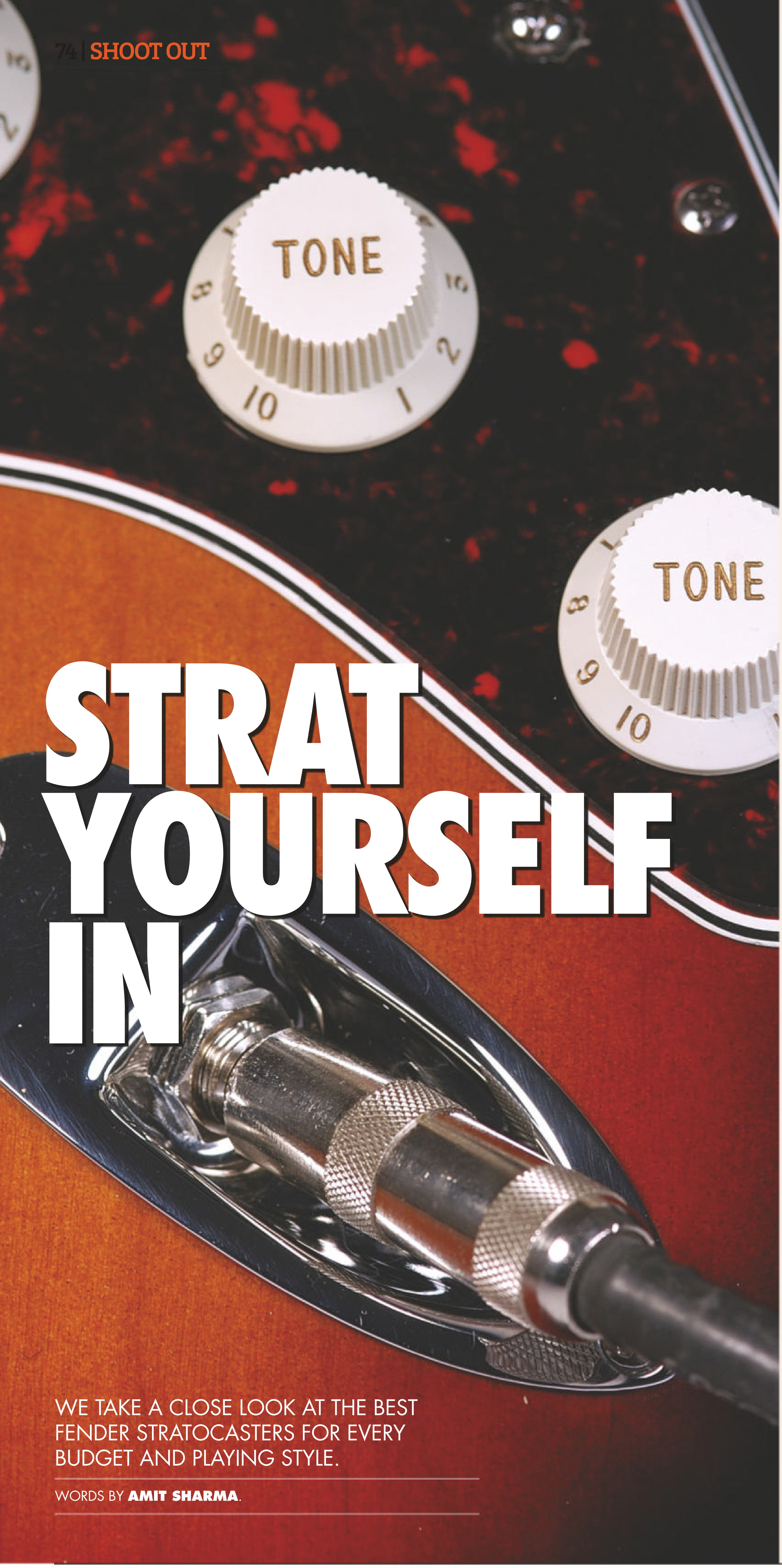
"Epiphone's order book was strong in the mid-'60s. Kalamazoo's best year ever preceded Ted McCarty's exit [in 1966], which has always been a mystery to me," Koehler ruminates. "Did he see the writing on the wall? He clearly wanted out in 1965, but at the same time they were the most successful they had ever been. The Kalamazoo factory was producing more than 100,000 instruments [of which Epiphone made up around 20 percent]. At that time, Epiphone's order book was very healthy, but, as I learned from Andy Nelson's nephew, Andy felt that the workers were deliberately not converting the order book to meet the demand.

"That was one of the things that doomed Epiphone; even though they were wildly popular, and The Beatles were playing Casinos, they just couldn't meet the demand. And I've heard that from a few other sources – there was competition between Gibson and Epiphone because Epiphone was treated differently. [The instruments] went through the factory side by side but they were managed separately, and that kind of created a rift."

With production at a fraction of its peak by the end of the '60s, Epiphone guitar manufacturing was shipped overseas in an effort to beat the more affordable import brands at their own game, and the last of the remaining instruments trickled out from Kalamazoo during 1970.

"The reason the market peaked in the mid-'60s in Kalamazoo is because immediately after that Japan started catching up and building really great lower-cost instruments," reasons Koehler. "There's more demand than ever now because our product line is more focused and it's coming at the time of this [COVID-19] pandemic when people are looking at more budget-friendly instruments.

"I'm so in love with Epiphone because of the amount of thought and energy that went into the brand in such a short amount of time. They produced some really cool ideas back in the day – many of which we haven't released yet. We're sitting on a cache of blueprints and design files for items that were never even created. We've revamped some of the old designs and they're killer. In my opinion, these new Epiphones are truly the best-value electric guitars."



STRAT YOURSELF IN

WE TAKE A CLOSE LOOK AT THE BEST FENDER STRATOCASTERS FOR EVERY BUDGET AND PLAYING STYLE.

WORDS BY **AMIT SHARMA**.

The Fender Stratocaster could very well be the most iconic electric guitar of all time. Though it arrived a few years after the original Broadcaster/Esquire Teles that made history as the world's first mass-produced solidbody electric, the Stratocaster quickly became Fender's best-selling instrument, a tradition which has lasted to this day. And now, with so much choice, finding the best Stratocaster for you can be a big task.

That's why we're here to answer the question of which Fender Stratocasters are the best. Whether you're after a budget electric bearing the Fender logo, or something more upmarket, by the end of this guide you should know the difference between the various Fender Stratocaster models, and be closer to knowing which one is right for you.

WHAT ARE THE BEST STRATOCASTERS?

If you're looking more of a top-line, US-made Strat, the Fender American Original '60s Stratocaster oozes all the class and pedigree you'd expect from the Big F. Boasting Custom Shop-associated finishes like Shell Pink and Olympic White, it's an instrument that's guaranteed to feel, look and sound the part.

The affordable Fender Player series has fast become one of the most successful lines to ever come out of the Ensenada, Mexico factory. These Strats are available with options for HSH or HSS pickup configurations and even Floyd Roses, but it's the classic Strat – available in a tantalising Buttercream finish, alongside six others – that screams pure Fender.

A FEW BITS OF ADVICE

THINK LONG AND HARD ABOUT YOUR PICKUP CONFIGURATION

Sure, you can always replace pickups further down the line – but it would be much more cost-effective to invest in a Fender Strat that's voiced to your needs. Those in search of cleaner tones may prefer to stick with Fender's typically noiseless and lower-output single coils, while someone looking to dial into more high gain and heavy metal tones might need more bark from their guitar's electronics, and perhaps be more suited to one or even two humbuckers or hot rail-style pickups.

And there are always exceptions to such rules – some of the most legendary rock and metal tones ever recorded have shined through thanks to their single-coil grit. So it's worth asking yourself what has typically been used by the artists you're most inspired by.

LOOK AT THE NON-AMERICAN INSTRUMENTS

As nice as it is to see the words 'Fender Corona, CA' on the headstock of your newest guitar, it's worth looking at the company's more affordable options made in the Ensenada factory and also the under-budget brand Squier, whose lines recreate the American-made models and often with great success.

This ultimately means you could get the guitar of your dreams for a lot less – depending on what you're looking for in terms of colour scheme, parts and build. If you're looking to invest in a high-quality instrument that will retain its value, however, then an American-made Strat will probably best fit the bill – or, indeed a signature model made in collaboration with a big-name artist.

SQUIER AFFINITY SERIES STRATOCASTER

Classic Strat looks for an absolute steal.

RRP: $469

Body: Alder

Neck: Maple or Rosewood

Scale: 25.5 inches

Fingerboard: Indian Laurel

Frets: 22

Pickups: Three Squier Standard Single-Coils

Controls: Master Volume, Tone 1 (Neck/Middle Pickups), Tone 2 (Bridge Pickup)

Hardware: Chrome

PROS

- As cheap as it gets for a 'real' Strat.
- Seven colour options, including Surf Green and Race Red.

CONS

- Aimed at beginners.

Costing roughly a third of the hugely popular, Mexican-made Player Stratocasters – which themselves cost roughly a third of their American-made equivalents – you can see just how far down the family tree we're going here. But the Squier Affinity series really does offer a great value – you get a decent-sounding and reliable instrument that can still legally call itself a Strat and will almost definitely perform better than most clones out there at this rock-bottom price range.

If you're looking for your first guitar or perhaps buying one for someone you know, the Affinity series – which also has HSS models for those wanting more power – will be hard to beat.

PLAYER STRATOCASTER

One of the best Fender Stratocasters in the mid-price range.

RRP: $1,349

Body: Alder

Neck: Maple

Scale: 25.5 inches

Fingerboard: Maple

Frets: 22

Pickups: Player Series Alnico 5 Strat Single-Coil

Controls: Master Volume, Tone 1 (Neck/Middle Pickups), Tone 2 (Bridge Pickup)

Hardware: Nickel/Chrome

PROS

- Unbeatable value for money.
- More power thanks to Player Series Alnico 5 Strat Single-Coil pickups.

CONS

- Some might prefer lower-output single-coils.

Replacing the Mexican Standard series in 2018, the Player range has been widely praised for bringing everything you'd want out of a Strat to a more affordable price-point. The Alnico 5 pickups are voiced similar to the SRV-inspired Texas Hot single-coils, perfect for a slightly thicker Strat snarl that loses none of its bite when pushed.

Best of all, there are options for a remarkably vintage-looking Buttercream finish and HSS configurations to compliment a Modern C-shaped neck profile with a 9.5-inch-radius fingerboard and a two-point tremolo bridge with bent-steel saddles. Ultimately, you're getting a Strat that can do it all and look the part without breaking the bank.

VINTERA '50S STRATOCASTER

A modern recreation faithful to the original vintage design.

RRP: $1,899

Body: Alder or Ash

Neck: Maple

Scale: 25.5 inches

Fingerboard: Maple

Frets: 22

Pickups: Vintage Style 50s Single-Coil

Controls: Master Volume, Tone 1 (Neck/Middle Pickups), Tone 2 (Bridge Pickup)

Hardware: Nickel/Chrome

PROS

- Amazing value for money.
- Classic finishes including Seafoam Green and Sonic Blue.

CONS

- No options for HSS configurations.

Unveiled last year, the Fender Vintera series aimed to "reimagine, consolidate and replace" the Classic line being made in the Ensenada factory. And it did precisely that – paying tribute to the American giant's original designs from the '50s, '60s and '70s, all with period-correct features. Which is why you'll find they're available in only SSS configurations (though there is a Vintera '60s model that comes with the addition of an S1 switch).

The Vintera '50s are perhaps the most eye-catching of the lot, available in three finishes, including collector's favourites Seafoam Green and Sonic Blue, and voiced to recreate the chime and articulation of the earliest Strats in production. A truly historic instrument without the historic price tag.

LIMITED EDITION HM STRAT

The best Fender Stratocaster for metal guitarists.

RRP: $2,499

Body: Basswood

Neck: Maple

Scale: 25.1 inches

Fingerboard: Rosewood

Frets: 24

Pickups: 2x Custom HM Single-Coils, 1x Custom HM humbucker

Controls: Master Volume, Tone 1 (Neck/Middle Pickups), Tone 2 (Bridge Pickup)

Hardware: Black

PROS

- Any shredder's dream.
- Original '80s colours, features and logo.

CONS

- Aimed specifically at higher-gain players.

The short-lived '88-'92 run of heavy metal-friendly Strats were very much tailored to an era of super-shredders. Famed for their extreme playability and bright colour schemes, the line was brought back to life at last year's Winter NAMM. The new models offer a basswood body, Gotoh tuners, an HSS pickup configuration with a coil split switch for the bridge pickup, a Floyd Rose locking tremolo and 24 jumbo frets.

Of course, these latest versions wouldn't be the same without a black headcap and that infamous '80s stylised Fender logo on the headstock. The new limited-edition models come in four finishes – Bright White, Ice Blue, Flash Pink and Frozen Yellow – with options for rosewood or maple fingerboards on the original 17-inch radius / 25.1-inch scale, narrow C-shaped neck that was highly praised for effortless performance.

TOM MORELLO STRATOCASTER

The RATM legend's Soul Power Strat can now be yours!

RRP: $2,749

Body: Alder

Neck: Maple

Scale: 25.5 inches

Fingerboard: Maple

Frets: 22

Pickups: 2x Vintage Noiseless, 1x Seymour Duncan Hot Rails

Controls: Master Volume, Tone 1 (Neck/Middle Pickups), Tone 2 (Bridge Pickup), Killswitch Toggle

Hardware: Nickel/Chrome

PROS

- A very iconic instrument.
- Comes with all of Tom Morello's customisations, including (optional) decal.

CONS

- Floyd Rose and killswitch not for everyone.

Few artists have used their guitar as a weapon in the way Tom Morello has. As the founding guitarist of Rage Against The Machine, he was usually spotted with his custom Arm The Homeless superstrat, but in Audioslave he was more known for playing his black Aerodyne Stratocaster – now made available by Fender from this year.

Though this model doesn't actually come with 'Soul Power' written across its upper body, the decal is included for those hoping to recreate the iconic look – which is a nice option to have. It also comes with many more of the RATM legend's customisations – from the chrome pickguard and killswitch toggle to the recessed Floyd Rose system and inclusion of a Seymour Duncan Hot Rails bridge pickup for heavy humbucker sounds. What you get is a very modernised Strat perfectly suited to higher gain rock riffers and shredders alike.

STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN STRATOCASTER

The blues virtuoso's 'Number One' Strat was the core of his tone.

RRP: $3,599

Body: Select Alder

Neck: Maple (thick oval shape)

Scale: 25.5 inches

Fingerboard: Pao Ferro

Frets: 22

Pickups: 3x Texas Special Single-Coils

Controls: Master Volume, Tone 1 (Neck/Middle Pickups), Tone 2 (Bridge Pickup)

Hardware: Gold

PROS

- A tribute to one of the most famous Strat players in history.
- Fuller-sounding Custom Shop Texas Special pickups.

CONS

- Reverse bridge might not be for everyone.

To many, he was the greatest blues maestro of all-time. Welding together his favourite Albert King and Jimi Hendrix licks into a monster package of his own, Stevie Ray Vaughan's phrasing and tone have continued to set the bar today – which is precisely why his signature guitar is one of the best-selling artist models in Fender history.

This recreation of his 'Number One' Strat features his favoured Texas Special pickups for added warmth and bite, his engraved SRV pickguard, gold-plated hardware, a Pau Ferro fingerboard and a reverse vintage-style tremolo bridge as the Dallas prodigy himself preferred. Thankfully it comes fitted with 10-46 gauge strings, instead of the flesh-tearing 13s SRV generally stuck with.

If you're looking to get Scuttle Buttin' or for a slice of Riviera Paradise, this would definitely be the Strat for you.

AMERICAN ULTRA STRATOCASTER

A formidable Strat spec'd for today's player.

RRP: $3,899+

Body: Alder (ash on trans finish)

Neck: Maple (bolt-on)

Scale: 25.5 inches

Fingerboard: Rosewood or Maple

Frets: 22 (medium jumbo)

Pickups: 3x Ultra Noiseless Vintage Strat Single-Coils

Controls: Master volume with S-1 switch, 2 x tone, 5-way blade pickup switch

Hardware: 2-Point Deluxe Synchronised Tremolo

PROS

- Clever electronics with S-1 switch expands the Strat's range.
- The Modern D neck profile is superb.
- Quality build, hardware and pickups.
- Smart new range of finishes.

CONS

- For some, the Strat was perfected in '62.

Here is Fender's modernism at its best, with the iconic body shape largely unchanged save for some carefully thought out body contours, and a newly tapered heel to aid upper fret access. Fender's modernism is, of course, rooted with one foot in its storied history; the three Ultra Noiseless single-coils offer hum-free performance, and yet they are voiced to recall a bygone era. What's different now is that, with the S-1 switch adding the neck pickup to any position on the switch, the tone menu just got a whole lot longer.

The American Ultra Stratocaster represents the acme of Fender's production line guitar building. There are locking tuners, the Fender logo in gold foil, the Modern D profile neck is comfort objectified in maple, while the compound 10-to-14-inch radius feels thoroughly 2020. Yes, this is a future-forward design, but indelibly still a Stratocaster – a darn good one.

AMERICAN ORIGINAL '60S STRATOCASTER

A high-class, American-made instrument that nods to Fender's glory years.

RRP: $3,799

Body: Alder (with lacquer finish)

Neck: Maple (thick '60s C-shape)

Scale: 25.5 inches

Fingerboard: Rosewood

Frets: 22

Pickups: 3x Three Pure Vintage '65 Single-Coils

Controls: Master Volume, Tone 1 (Neck/Middle Pickups), Tone 2 (Bridge Pickup)

Hardware: Nickel/Chrome

PROS

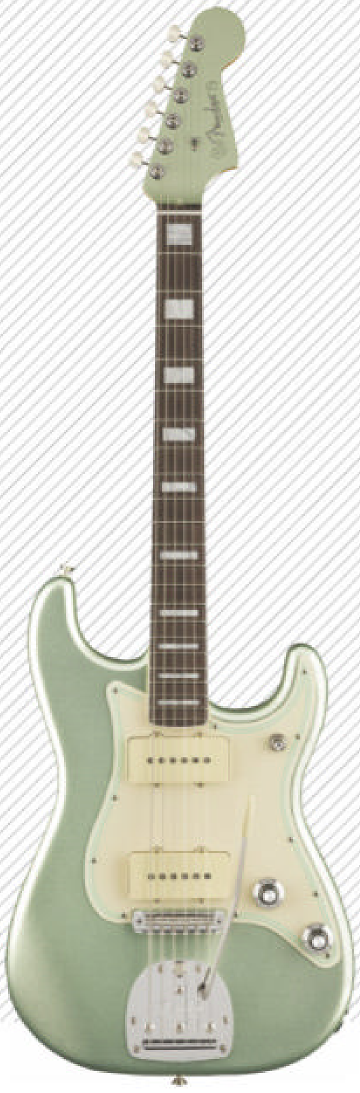
- One of the best American-made Strats currently available.
- Three great colour choices, including Shell Pink.

CONS

- More suited to vintage-style players.

If you're looking for a beautifully constructed, American-made Strat that has more in common with Fender's past than other models, then the American Original '60s will undoubtedly score high. Period-correct appointments such as an alder body with lacquer finish, mint green pickguard and a rosewood fingerboard bring lots of vintage appeal, though unlike the original Strats from this era, it benefits from a five-way pickup switch – offering some level of modern versatility.

Best of all, though, are the options for an Olympic White finish - or even better, Shell Pink - which make it a guitar that can truly turn back time and transport you through Fender's most iconic years.



PARALLEL UNIVERSE VOL II JAZZ STRAT

One of the best Fender Stratocasters for left-field fans.

RRP: $3,999

Body: Offset Alder With Maple Top

Neck: Solid Rosewood (C-shape)

Scale: 25.5 inches

Fingerboard: Rosewood

Frets: 22

Pickups: 3x Texas Special Single-Coils

Controls: Master Volume, Master Tone Blend

Hardware: Chrome

PROS

- A truly one-off design.
- Ultra vintage aesthetic.

CONS

- Maybe a bit too out-there for some.

2020's instalment in the Fender Parallel Universe range saw some truly curious additions, including this limited-edition Jazz Strat – effectively combining the body of a Strat with the neck, vibrato and pickups of a Jazzmaster, along with a custom Decoboom Streamline pinstriped pickguard and aluminium radio knobs.

Along with the Pure Vintage 65 single-coils found on Jazzmasters, which feature vintage bobbin construction to genuine original-era cloth wiring, there's the Jazzmaster bridge with brass Mustang saddles that keep the strings where they belong and a screw-in arm that stays securely in the tremolo. Finished in Transparent Seafoam Green that makes it feel even more collectable and obscure, here's a Strat completely reimagined in every sense of the word.

HOT GEAR

SEYMOUR DUNCAN PSYCLONE HUMBUCKER

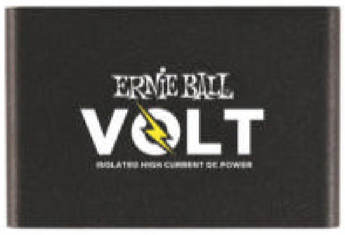
RRP: $365 • australismusic.com.au

Whether for rockabilly, blues, country, or full-on rock 'n' roll, the Filter'Tron pickup has long been the coolest tool for some of the coolest players. Powered by double-thickness alnico V bar magnets, the Psyclone delivers vintage output for period-accurate tones, with just a little extra muscle from the bridge position. Four-conductor lead wire provides plenty of wiring options and the choice of nickel or gold covers means Psyclone humbuckers will look perfect in any guitar.

CORT G280DX JSS ELECTRIC

RRP: $999 • dynamicmusic.com.au

The new flagship model of the revamped G Series, the G280DX features the highest quality materials and components along with meticulous workmanship of Cort's most outstanding builders. Designed with the best possible playability and sonic performance in mind, the G280DX comprises of alder body with flame maple top and Canadian hard maple neck for a versatile sound that can be used for both classic and modern musical genres.



ERNIE BALL VOLT

RRP: $215 • cmcmusic.com.au

The Ernie Ball Volt gives the power to the pedal! With its multiple isolated, high current DC power outputs, the Volt supplies clean, regulated power to almost any digital or analogue effects pedal. The compact and rugged housing can fit almost anywhere on even the most dense pedalboard. If you need low noise and reliable power for any gig, the Ernie Ball Volt is perfect for your rig!

YAMAHA THR30IIA WIRELESS

RRP: $999 • au.yamaha.com

The THR30IIA Wireless amplifier is designed specifically for acoustic guitarists. Realistic microphone modelling and onboard effects offer inspiring tones – as though your guitar's sound was captured in a professional studio – and the compact size and classic style fit naturally into any environment. With Bluetooth support, a rechargeable battery, and a built-in Line 6 Relay wireless receiver, you don't have to worry about wires. Just focus on the music, wherever you want to play.

FAITH FX SERIES

RRP: $2,150+ • cmcmusic.com.au

Responding to many requests from players who like the look and sound of the tonewoods featured in models such as the BloodMoon and BlueMoon, Faith come up with three stunning and exotic variants of the Neptune baby-jumbo shape. Each of the three guitars share the high-specification fittings common to other Faith instruments – such as an ebony fingerboard, bridge and headplate, and all solid construction throughout – but each has a completely unique look.

FENDER JOE STRUMMER CAMPFIRE ACOUSTIC

RRP: $899 • fender.com

More than 40 years after The Clash's iconic album London Calling was released, Joe Strummer – the band's articulate and fiery co-founder, lyricist, rhythm guitarist and lead singer – remains an incredible influence to players all over the world. The Joe Strummer Campfire guitar is inspired by the legendary campfires that he held at Glastonbury Festival and are now continued annually in the Strummerville area at the festival. This small-body acoustic-electric guitar is the perfect companion for gatherings of any size and to continue Strummer's legacy of bringing people together through music.

ZOOM MULTISTOMP MS-70CDR CHORUS DELAY REVERB

RRP: $259 • dynamicmusic.com.au

From a warm, vintage sound to a clear, modern tone, the MS-70CDR can do it all. Its powerful line-up of 86 diverse effects includes 16 chorus, 26 delay and 29 reverbs, including classic models from famous brands. In addition, there are more than a dozen flangers, tremolos, vibratos, phasers and other modulation effects – everything you'll ever need, all in one stompbox.

ZOOM
MULTISTOMP
MS-70CDR
Chorus
Delay
Reverb

FENDER NOVENTA SERIES

RRP: $1,899+ • fender.com

Combining classic Fender style and dynamic Noventa pickups, the Noventa Series delivers powerful tones, modern playability and dashing good looks. The custom Noventa pickups provide extraordinary range and versatility with classic midrange bite, crisp highs and warm, smooth lows. Featuring 21 medium-jumbo frets and a 9.5-inch radius fingerboard, Noventa Series guitars deliver a smooth blend of modern and vintage playability that is distinctly Fender.

LINE 6 POD GO WIRELESS

RRP: $1,349 • au.yamaha.com

With its simple plug-and-play interface, ultra-portable lightweight design, and best-in-class tones, the POD Go Wireless guitar processor gets you on the road to ultimate tone. Plus, its onboard Relay wireless receiver and included Relay G10TII transmitter free you to go wherever your inspiration takes you. Choose, edit, and control sounds using the colour LCD screen, five push encoders, eight rugged footswitches, and a cast-aluminium multi-function expression pedal – and add two external footswitches or a second expression pedal for even more real-time control.

LINE 6 POD GO
MODE
TAP

AMP
EQ
EFFECTS
MODIFY
MUSTANG MICRO

FENDER MUSTANG MICRO

RRP: $219 • fender.com

The Mustang Micro is a complete personal guitar amplifier featuring a wide selection of tones from the wildly popular Mustang series amps. It's ideal for any player from beginner to pro, making it quick and easy to get great tones when jamming at home or on the go. The Mustang Micro's eighth-inch stereo headphone out allows the flexibility to use your favourite wired headphones or earbuds and silently play with a responsive touch and feel without annoying latency. Want to jam along with tunes from your music library or favourite streaming service? The Mustang Micro supports Bluetooth audio streaming from your mobile device, tablet or computer, and features automatic Audio/Visual sync, making it a great tool for practicing and learning songs.

ORANGE ACOUSTIC PREAMP PEDAL

RRP: $289 • australismusic.com.au

This do-it-all, compact pre-amp pedal has been designed and built using all the company's know-how from the acclaimed Acoustic Pre TC preamp and the Crush Acoustic 30 amplifier. Crammed with features, this highly versatile pedal leaves guitarists free to do what they do best: play! Whether you need to win the battle against feedback, handle complex effects chains, brighten up a dull instrument or just plug into a PA, the Acoustic Pedal has you covered.

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EFFECTS
EQ
AMP
Fender
MUSTANG MICRO
THE AMP THAT
GOES ANYWHERE.

AUSTRALIAN
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CAPTURE THE SOUND

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Producer extraordinaire Joe Barresi takes us behind the mind-melting magic of Tool's 2019 epic *Fear Inoculum*

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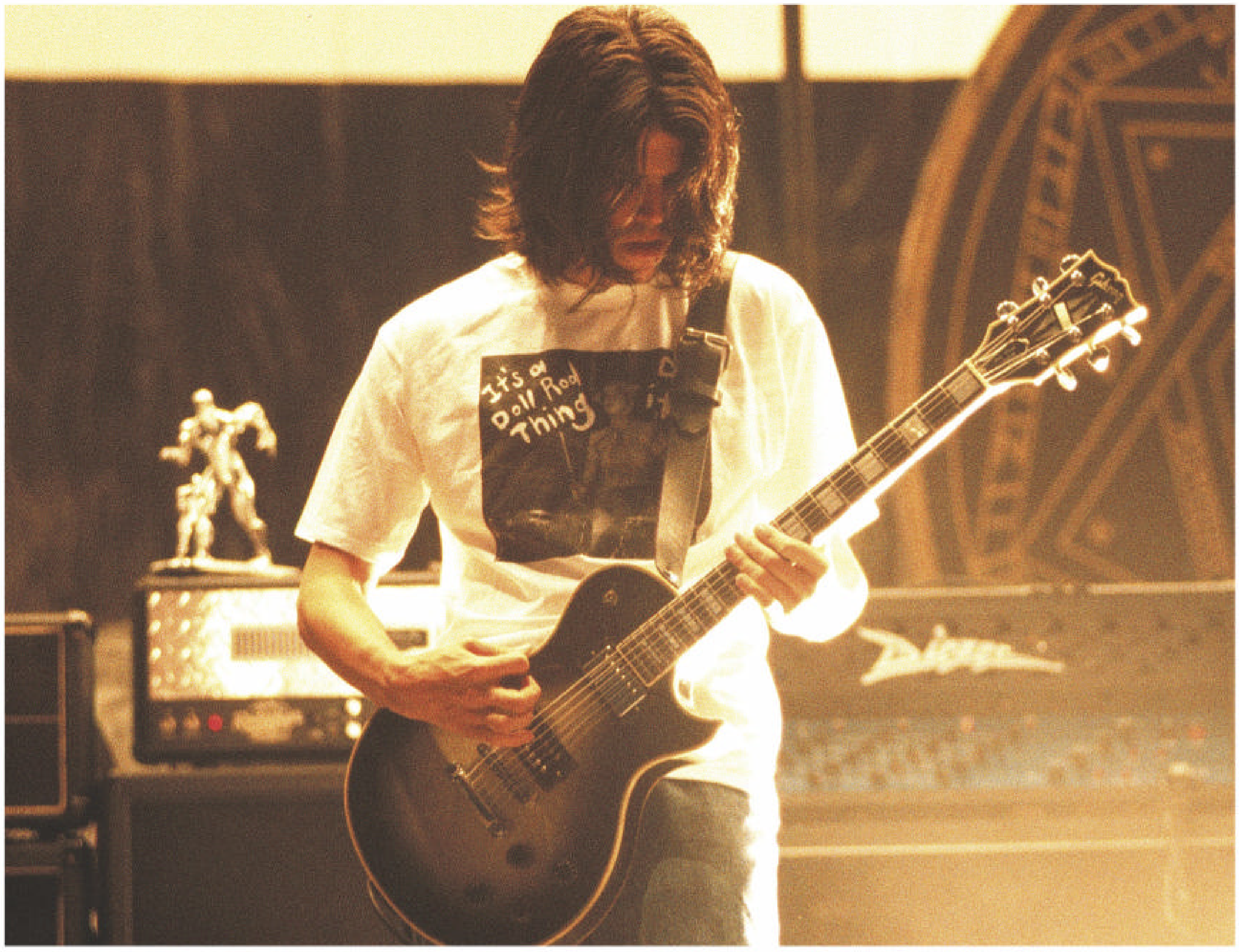


THE SOUND OF FEAR

RENOWNED PRODUCER **JOE BARRESI** LETS US IN ON THE SECRETS BEHIND **ADAM JONES**' IMMACULATE TONE ON **TOOL**'S GENERATION-DEFINING FIFTH ALBUM, *FEAR INOCULUM*.

INTRODUCTION BY **MATT DORIA**. INTERVIEW BY **DAVID VON BADER**. PHOTO BY **TIM MOSENFELDER**.

For an album that took 13 painstakingly long and arduous years to bring to life, it stands to reason why Tool guitarist Adam Jones would put so much effort into meticulously crafting his tone for *Fear Inoculum*. The Californian post-metallers' fifth album was critically adored for a multitude of reasons, but at the forefront of them all was the punchy, polychromatic and poignant guitar runs that Jones delivered.

Working closely with Jones on Fear Inoculum was producer Joe Barresi – who alongside Tool has worked with such alternative staples as Kyuss, Slipknot, the Melvins, Queen Of The Stone Age and Nine Inch Nails (to name just a select few). There's a method to Barresi's madness that makes him the kind of legendary producer bands pray they have the chance to meet with; and on *Fear Inoculum*, he captures an energy from Jones that is at once polarising and comforting – it's quintessentially Tool, but crisper and crunchier than ever before.

In the following chat, Barresi fills us in on what went into making Jones' tone on *Fear Inoculum* something we'll be gushing about for years to come.

What was the starting point for Adam's guitar tones on the new album?

His sound is definitely his Les Paul Custom into his main Diezel VH4 and that Marshall Superbass, but like the last record, I also implemented a Bogner Uberschall and a Rivera Knucklehead Reverb or a Knucklehead K Tre as part of the equation.

I recorded both of Adam's personal amps to their own track and combined the Bogner and Rivera to a single track, plus we ran a mic'd Leslie cab in stereo the whole time, which gave us a total of five tracks wide of just guitar. That was the main dirty sound, but the clean sound varied a lot. Besides cleaning up and dropping the gain on the amps we used for distortion sounds, I used an old Orange, an old Peavey, a new Fryette-made Sound City half-stack, an old Kustom and a Naylor. Adam was really into experimenting with other stuff – guitars included – this time around.

What cabs did you use?

The body of it was Mesa/Boogie 4-by-12s loaded with eight-ohm Celestion V-30s. The Riveras went into a Rivera 4-by-12 loaded with 75-watt Celestions, which is my favourite speaker because they have a tight bottom end. The Uberschall was in a Mesa cab and the Marshall was in Adam's own Marshall cab that had either Celestion V-30s or Greenbacks. The Sound City stuff went through 50-Watt Fanes that were in a new Sound City 4-by-12.

The four amps besides the Marshall that were used for the dirty sounds have a lot of sonic overlap. Could you explain what each one brought to that core sound?

For this record, we ran the Diezel on the third channel with a good rock sound, pretty saturated. It's actually a modified Diezel that's had a preamp mod done to it - so it's the best-sounding Diezel in his arsenal of VH4s. The mod gives it a different responsiveness somehow; it just feels a bit punchier. It's also highly volatile because of that, but amps seem to sound better when they're about to explode! It has a thing and it definitely complements how Adam plays.

The Marshall fills in the clarity and articulation that's missing from the Diezel when in high-gain mode. I brought in the Uberschall for some overall beef and the Riveras for some extra muscle as their EQs are so flexible, and they work nicely for both dirty and clean sounds. Since the signal was split to at least four heads, I put a pedal in front of everything and it helped shape the front-end of all the amps a bit. I used an MXR Micro Amp +, which gave us a little more EQ flexibility, so I could crack in some top or take out some bottom if needed.

We also ended up using a SoloDallas wireless preamp unit to drive the front of some amps and give a little extra push on some songs. It was nice to have the time to experiment, and those guys are all about whatever it takes and really encouraging of it. We ended up using a '60s Gretsch Jet Firebird for some clean stuff, which has that semi-hollow tone and rings differently. Adam brought in a Gibson Marauder - which I thought was the ugliest guitar I'd ever seen - but it has the pickups Bill Lawrence designed for Gibson, and it blew my mind how much clarity those pickups had; with that five-way varitone switch, you can dial in almost any sound."

The record has a lot of heavily effected guitar sounds that make for some major impact points. How did the two of you go about crafting those tones?

Adam's main delay is a Boss DD-3 and as we didn't track to a click, we spent a lot of time getting the delay in time with Danny's drums while we overdubbed. Sometimes we would run two or three Boss DD-3 Digital Delays in a row and turn them on or off for different sections. Once the delay was perfectly in time, it really made sense to me because it opened up this space between the beats that allowed Danny and Justin be clearly heard. There was a lot of experimentation involved with reverbs and room sounds, too.

We did all kinds of weird shit with interactive effects like Caroline's Kilobyte and Meteore, which you can step on and latch to do regeneration feedback. But for the most part Adam really liked to get feedback by playing in front of his amps and we spent quite a bit of time doing that, it's such a big part of his sound. A lot of the really weird effects stuff was done in mixing.

WHO NEEDS A STUDIO?

WITH STUDIOS AROUND THE WORLD OUT OF COMMISSION THANKS TO THE NEW-AGE PLAGUE, **RON ZABROCKI** SHOWS US HOW TO CREATE PROFESSIONAL-SOUNDING TRACKS AT HOME.

Every producer has their secrets. Some use gear, like a certain mic or pre or vintage amp to get a signature sound. Sometimes it's studio trickery. I just like to think of it as being in control of the studio space and the tools at hand. Sometimes the most obvious tracking methods are overlooked by the casual observer. Here are some of those tips. I guarantee a better sound by applying these simple methods – you might even discover your own signature sound!

1. GAIN STAGING

The guitar goes into the amp or modeller. Then, if it is a modeller, does it go directly into your converter or into a preamp? If it is a preamp, it will leave the pre and then hit the converter before the computer. If the guitar went to an amp, then the amp is mic'd up.

The mic signal goes into a preamp. The preamp may then go into a compressor. After that, it is off to the converter before the computer. Simple, right? But how is the signal from one piece of the chain to the next? This is called gain staging. Each should be strong and balanced without any weakness or overloads. Be sure to check the gain in each stage (And use quality cables).

2. EVENNESS OF SOUND

This is the most important of my considerations when I am tracking for a client or myself. I like to hear a balance of top, mid and bottom in the character of the one. This way it becomes incredibly flexible when it's time to mix. Use your ears and really hear the sound. Is it muddy on the bottom? Too shrill? Scooped in the mids? Don't be lazy. Make any and all adjustments. You'll be happy you did.

3. NATURAL THICKNESS

We all double track. Big-sounding guitars panned hard left and right. But how many create an extra layer of natural thickness by doubling each of those parts with another layer de-tuned slightly? And please don't think using your computer to de-tune it a little is the same because it is not! Play it again. Re-tune a few cents off for each new part.

The added extra performance will also help if it is slightly off here and there. You are supposed to be musicians and not computer geeks! Work! Play it again! By the way, this works incredibly well on acoustic guitars, too.

4. THE ENVIRONMENT

Are you tracking all your guitars using the same amp? How about the same mic? How about the same speaker? And you leave them all in the same position in the same room for every track on the song? Dude, no good!

If you have only one mic, one guitar and one amp, you can still vary the mic position. Sometimes radically. Or the position on the cone of the mic. Or take the amp into a different room and track from there! And if you are only using a modelling amp, then you can still make the same considerations! Add a room sound, early reflection or mic position in the modeller. I love the combination of tracks using amps and modellers.

5. DEFINITION

Do your tracks sound sloppy? Muddy? Distortion is a temptress. Too much juice can be incredible! But not necessarily in the studio. Cut back on the gain by at least 20 percent on the rhythm parts. Then try adding uber-clean guitar tracks playing the same parts and tuck them in so they are just barely audible! This will add definition to your dense, fast metal tracks and the added benefit of actually hearing some tone come into your sonic landscape!

6. MULTI-MIC

I do not believe any one microphone can capture all of the guitar sound. That being said, the most common combination is the dynamic mic and a ribbon. The dynamic captures the bite while the ribbon captures the body. Invest in your own mics. The combo does not cost any more than another good guitar. And as sexy as those preamps look in the studio, the mics are more obvious to your ears. But a couple of good pre's are certainly not going to hurt you in any way.

7. MODULATION AND COMPOSURE

How many of you solo over the verse? Gee, that's exciting! Play something boring over the same part that has already been repeated. How about writing a new part, modulated up to a new key (I like a minor third), vary the rhythm and chords to a new groove and watch the solo jump out! It will be like a breath of fresh air in an overcrowded room with a boring speaker! And no piece of gear or studio can fix a bad composition or add energy to a boring composition.

RON ZABROCKI ON RON ZABROCKI

I'm a session guitarist from New York, now living in Connecticut. I started playing at age six, sight reading right off the bat. That's how I was taught, so I just believed everyone started that way! I could pretty much sight read anything within a few years, and that aided me in becoming a session guy later in life. I took lessons from anyone I could and was fortunate enough to have some wonderful instructors, including John Scofield, Joe Pass and Alan DeMausse. I've played many jingle sessions, and even now I not only play them but have written a few. I've "ghosted" for a few people that shall remain nameless, but they get the credit and I got the money! I've played sessions in every style, from pop to jazz.

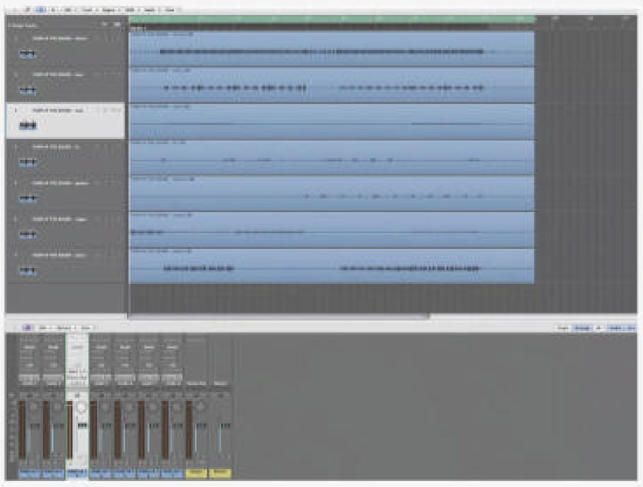
(HEAD)PHONING IT IN

IF YOU'RE LOOKING TO BRING YOUR TRACK TO LIFE VIA HEADPHONES, RATHER THAN THROUGH STEREO SPEAKERS, IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW THE INS AND OUTS. HERE'S HOW YOU CAN OPTIMISE YOUR MIXDOWN FOR MAXIMUM OOMPH!

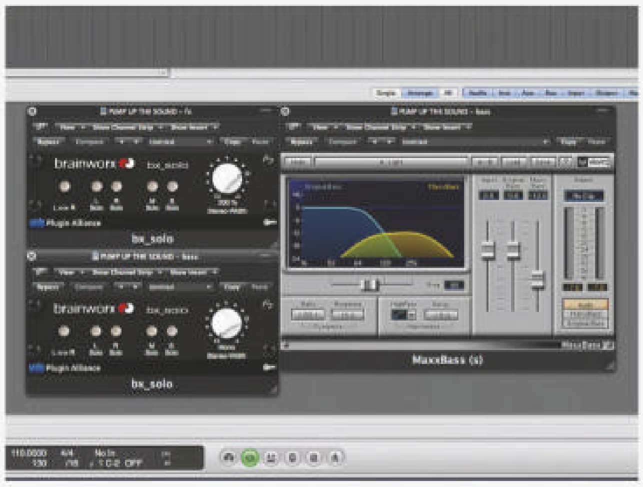
There are many really important differences between hearing a track on speakers and through studio headphones, so if you only ever use headphones for mixing, it's important to bear some principles in mind to avoid bungled mixes.

Common mistakes include making the stereo field too narrow, and not splashing enough reverb onto vocals and synth parts, leaving them overly dry. Judging how much of any effect to use should be a decision that's made through listening on both cans and monitors.

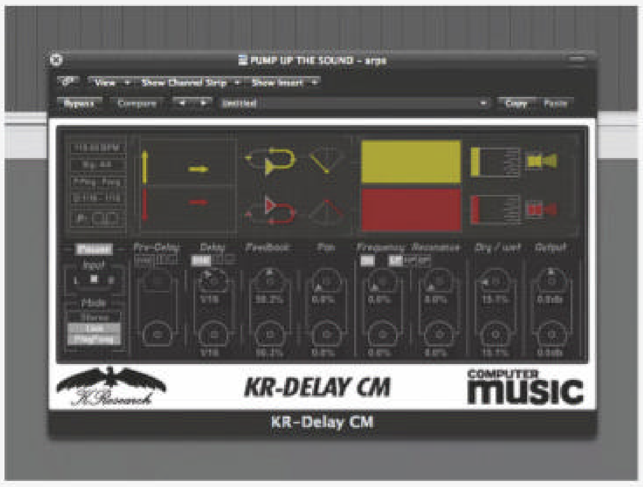
A well produced track should sound great on everything from laptop speakers to a high-end hi-fi. Don't forget: just because you can mix on headphones doesn't necessarily mean that you should. That said, there are techniques that can help you mix more accurately when using just a sat of cans. In this walkthrough we'll guide you step-by-step through the process of mixing a track without using monitors.



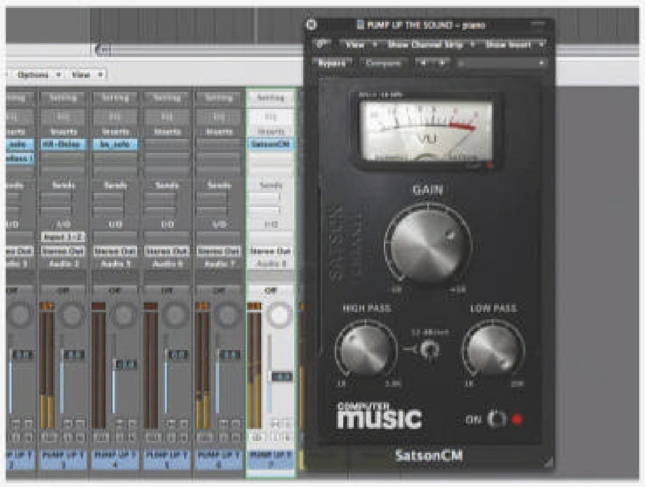
STEP 1: We're using some stems from a piano-led alternative pop track and have dropped them into our DAW. The track sounds pretty good in our headphones but we'll need to make some adjustments so that it both translates well over a monitor setup and has a bit more depth and detail for those listening on cans.


brainworx
bx_solo
Plugin Alliance
bx_solo
brainworx
bx_solo
Plugin Alliance
bx_solo
MaxxBass (s)

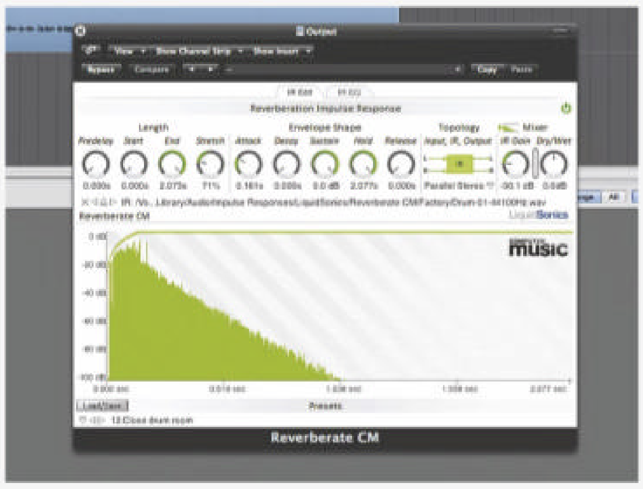
STEP 2: To make the FX track stand out more in the mix, we use Brainworx BX Solo to widen the stereo field to 200 percent and drop the volume by -3 decibels. We use BX Solo again on the bassline but this time narrow the width to mono. We also add an instance of Waves MaxxBass to generate harmonics of the bassline, giving us an audible impression of the thump of the low end, even though we can't feel it.


PUMP UP THE SOUND - arps
Pre-Delay
Delay
Feedback
Pan
Frequency
Resonance
Dry / wet
Output
KR-DELAY CM
COMPUTER music
KR-Delay CM

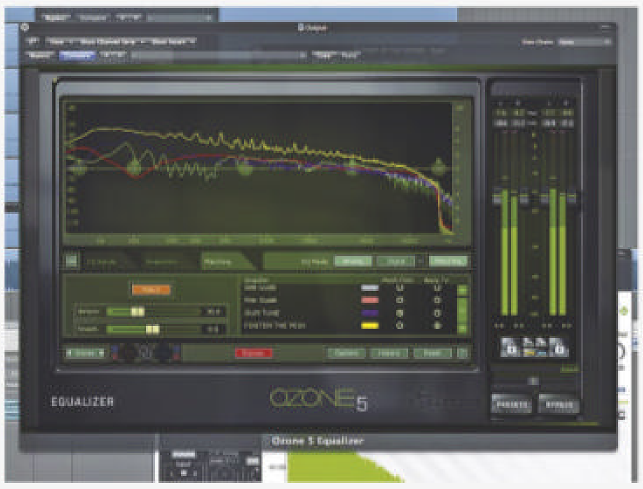
STEP 3: The arpeggio track will sound fine over monitors but is a little too sterile in our headphones. We give it some subtle ping-pong delay with KR-Delay CM's Delay set to 1/16 and the Dry/Wet at 15 percent. Although this effect won't be noticed much when heard on speakers, it helps to make the whole track sound less dry for those listening on 'phones.


PUMP UP THE SOUND - piano
VU
GAIN
SATSON
HIGH PASS
LOW PASS
COMPUTER music
ON
SatsonCM

STEP 4: The chords and notes of the piano line are easy to pick out using our cans. However, we'll need to make it sound more in-your-face over speakers. Instead of turning it up, we give it +8 decibels Gain using console channel emulator Satson CM. We drop the track's level to -8 decibels to compensate for this. We also increase Satson CM's High pass to 200Hz to stop the piano clashing with the bass and kick.


Output
Reverberation Impulse Response
Length
Envelope Shape
Topology
Mixer
Reverberate CM
COMPUTER music
LiquidSonics
Presets
Reverberate CM

STEP 5: For the same reason that we added a little depth to the arpeggio line with some delay, we're going to give the whole mix some reverb. This will help things gel together over headphones and give some extra depth. We use Reverberate CM's Close Drum Room preset and turn the IR Gain down to -30 decibels so that we get just some subtle reverb feedback.


EQUALIZER
OZONE 5
Ozone 5 Equalizer

STEP 6: It's hard to tell if our track is EQ'ed well using just headphones, so we're going to match the EQ from a commercial track. Houdini by Foster The People has a similar kind of vibe, so we're using that as a reference. Using Ozone 5's Equalizer, we take ten-second snapshots of our own track and Houdini and hit the Match button. We adjust the Amount and Smooth sliders as pictured.

CME WIDI MASTER

IS THIS MIDI-OVER-BLUETOOTH WIRELESS SYSTEM THE SOLUTION TO LIBERATING YOUR SETUP? REVIEW BY **JON MUSGRAVE**.

RRP: $99

The WIDI Master is a new MIDI-via-Bluetooth wireless system from CME and one of three wireless MIDIs they've been developing. Designed for hooking up devices with traditional five-pin DIN MIDI connections, WIDI Master can communicate directly with Bluetooth LE-equipped devices such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and desktops.

Significantly, and unlike some other options on the market, you can also use two pairs of WIDI Masters to connect two MIDI-socket-equipped devices. Each pack includes two MIDI adapters – main and sub. The slightly larger main unit is connected to your device's MIDI Out (from which it gets its power) and this acts as a send-and-receive module. The smaller sub unit connects to your device MIDI In and gets its signal when plugged into the main unit using the small flying lead.

The detachable design means the main WIDI module can also be used on its own for output only. Powering things via the MIDI Out is fully supported by the MIDI standard (both 5V and 3.3V), and CME has a database of tried-and-tested MIDI devices on their website, which is worth checking out in advance.

Still, your device may not support it. This could simply be down to internal pin wiring, and for the more technically capable, CME's website includes workarounds that modify your instrument or facilitate hooking up an external PSU. Alternatively, you could try CME's MIDI Jack device instead, as this allows external powering.

Like anything Bluetooth, pairing properly is key to success and if you're using two WIDI Masters they pair automatically (check the blue LED on the main unit). For other devices, it's worth following CME's detailed instructions as there are various options that facilitate the process. Both Android and iOS users are advised to use apps (Bluetooth MIDI BLE Connect and midimittr respectively). Meanwhile, Windows 10 users must check if their DAW supports Microsoft's latest UWP API. With everything paired, the main unit blue LED stops pulsing and flickers to indicate MIDI data activity.

In use, we connected both my Novation and Studiologic controllers to iPad and OSX devices without a problem (I didn't try Windows). We also connected two MIDI devices with a pair of WIDI Masters. These paired straight away and worked without extra steps. We easily managed ten metres distance with no problems, and, in this range, the connection was very stable.

What about latency? WIDI uses what CME call Smart Connectivity Algorithms (SCA). These combine various features including smart pairing, latency reduction and range optimisation to deliver a more reliable wireless experience. Of course, in practice, you simply notice the overall performance. We did a quick comparison with a direct USB MIDI connection and the timing was close. Looking at the MIDI note data revealed the WIDI data to be marginally later, but this wasn't obvious when playing.

As people who remember how liberating it was moving from two MIDI cables to MIDI over USB, losing the cables completely is very welcome, and though we've tried new controllers that implement MIDI over Bluetooth as standard, the device-to-device option is new to us. All told, we'd say that WIDI Master is a great success.

▶ VERDICT

A simple, reliable MIDI-over-Bluetooth solution that can link MIDI equipment or connect directly to Bluetooth LE devices.

▶ PROS

- Detachable main and sub units.
- Main unit can be used on its own.
- MIDI-socket-to-MIDI-socket capable.

Bluetooth LE connection supported.
MIDI activity LED.

▶ CONS

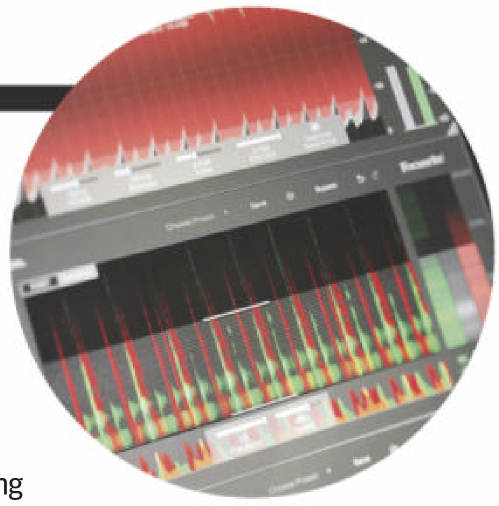
- Need to buy two sets for MIDI socket-to-MIDI-socket operation.

▶ CONTACT

Amber Technology
Ph: 1800 251 367
Web: ambertech.com.au

FOCUSRITE FAST SERIES PLUGINS

FOCUSRITE MEETS SONIBLE FOR THESE NEW 'SMART' MIXING TOOLS. REVIEW BY **SI TRUSS**.



Focusrite first announced its partnership with Austrian plugin developer Sonible back in 2019, and last summer released a co-branded freebie in the form of auto-EQ plugin Balancer. We're now seeing the true fruits of the collaboration with the launch of Focusrite's new software hub, The Collective, and a trio of Sonible-powered FAST plugins. The three plugins inaugurating the range are FAST Equaliser, FAST Compressor and FAST Reveal.

As with Balancer last year, at the heart of each is Sonible's impressive intelligent analysis technology, which can listen to the incoming audio and create a mixing preset tailored to fit the current track. FAST Equaliser and FAST Compressor are intentionally straightforward in design. Hit 'Learn' in either and the plugin listens to the input for a few seconds before creating an EQ or compression treatment to improve what it's hearing.

Each offers a selection of profiles to help the plugin work out the intended application – eg drums, acoustic guitar, vocal low, vocal high – plus hard, soft and neutral 'flavours'. By default the plugins open on a FAST interface, which displays just the bare-bones controls and largely jargon-free labelling, making them nicely approachable for those new to recording technology. The plugins also have a Detailed view though, opening up access to the standard parameters you'd expect for each effect type, such as each EQ band's frequency and Q, or attack, decay and ratio controls for the compressor.

There are nice touches to the design throughout. The EQ, for example, offers bespoke labelling of frequency bands depending on the selected profile, with tags such as 'Knock' and 'Punch' for drums or 'Body' and 'Picking' for guitar. You can solo and monitor each EQ band too. The compressor, meanwhile, uses an interactive waveform that makes fine-tuning threshold and ratio settings very intuitive.

FAST Reveal is the most interesting of the trio. This is essentially a spectral ducking tool that can analyse two audio signals and apply precise reductions aimed specifically at where frequency clashes happen. Simply add it to a track, select the element you want to avoid as a sidechain and hit 'Learn'. Again, there are profiles for different forms of sidechain style, as well as Light, Heavy and Balanced flavours. While the effect of FAST Reveal can be achieved with existing plugins, we've not seen this kind of precise ducking made quite so intuitive before. The results are impressive too – mostly subtle enough that you won't instantly hear the effect, but the extra mix clarity is certainly noticeable.

In our tests, the 'intelligent' features of all three plugins worked better on traditional 'band' or pop applications than more overtly electronic or unusual sources. That's expected to an extent, and suits the target market here – FAST Equaliser and FAST Compressor will likely appeal most to recording guitarists or musicians dabbling in first recordings. FAST Reveal is worth checking out whoever you are though, and could become a mixdown secret weapon. It's a solid start for The Collective, and the rent-to-own model makes these a very tempting trio of tools for any musicians who value ease-of-use and simplicity.

▶ VERDICT

An impressively user-friendly trio of smart plugins with broad appeal, but FAST Reveal is the highlight of the range so far.

▶ PROS

- Smartly designed, approachable interfaces.
- Accessible rent-to-own pricing.
- FAST Reveal is particularly unique and effective.

▶ CONS

- Currently no bundle deals for owners of more than one plugin.

▶ CONTACT

Innovative Music
Ph: (03) 9540 0658
Web: innovativemusic.com.au

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EV EVOLVE
PORTABLE COLUMN SYSTEMS

STERLING BY MUSIC MAN JASON RICHARDSON 7-STRING CUTLASS

RRP: $2,695

A FINE WORKHORSE FOR THE MODERN METAL ENTHUSIAST.

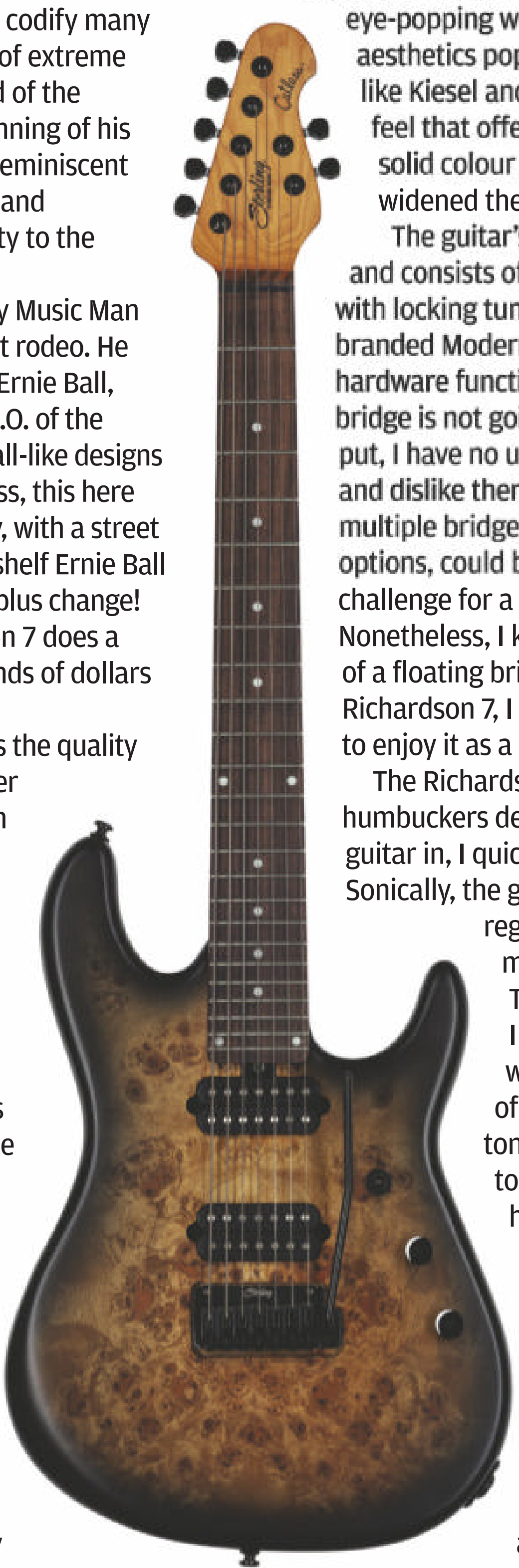
REVIEW BY **ALEX WILSON**.

Jason Richardson is one of our epoch's pre-eminent shred dudes. I remember seeing him come up the metal ranks via the djent acts Born Of Osiris and Chelsea Grin. He then crowdfunded his way to a successful solo career, and currently does double duty for the metalcore monster truck All That Remains.

It would be fair to say that Richardson's ample skill as a player has really helped codify many guitar tropes found at the nexus of extreme and progressive metal. He is fond of the chuggy pit-riff, yet from the beginning of his career his fleet-fingered leads – reminiscent of past virtuosos like Malmsteen and Vai – have lent technical credibility to the deathcore scene.

This guitar here, the Sterling by Music Man Richardson 7, is not the man's first rodeo. He already has a signature line with Ernie Ball, Sterling's parent company. The M.O. of the Sterling line is to provide Ernie Ball-like designs at a lower price-point. NonethEless, this here guitar still comes up pretty pricey, with a street value of around $2,200. The top-shelf Ernie Ball model asks an eye-watering $7K plus change!

Overall, though, the Richardson 7 does a good job of justifying the thousands of dollars that it would take to own it.



The first thing that struck me is the quality of the body build, made from alder coated with poplar. While made in Indonesia, the assembly is robust and competent. The guitar is smooth and comfortable to hold, surprisingly light given how solid it feels under the hands. The body and neck, taken as a whole, are roughly comparable in size to my Telecaster, yet all the edges are ergonomic and contoured. The Richardson 7 felt comfortable to play, whether seated or standing.

The roasted maple neck is wide with a 40-centimetre radius, but has a pleasing and gentle thin C contour that curves all the way over the back. The scale length of 25.5 inches accommodates 24 frets – really par for the course on an instrument like this. The cutaway is quite deep, and the heel where the neck meets the body unobtrusive, allowing for extensive access to the higher frets across all strings. The fingerboard is rosewood, and the frets medium jumbo. While the neck didn't feel superlative, it was nonetheless clean and comfortable.

I am not really a fan of this guitar's look, however. The yellowy-brown, woody, translucent finish ends up feeling both too busy and underwhelming. Granted, this reviewer's preference is for the cleaner designs of yesteryear rather than the eye-popping woodgrain-heavy aesthetics popularised by brands like Kiesel and Mayones. But I do feel that offering at least one solid colour finish would have widened the appeal.

The guitar's hardware is black, and consists of black tuning pegs with locking tuners alongside a Sterling-branded Modern Tremolo system. This hardware functions well. However, the choice of bridge is not going to please everyone. Simply put, I have no use for a Floyd Rose-style bridge, and dislike them generally. I accept that providing multiple bridge options, unlike multiple finish options, could be an insurmountable production challenge for a targeted signature model. Nonetheless, I know I am not alone in being wary of a floating bridge. Given the overall quality of the Richardson 7, I would have loved the opportunity to enjoy it as a hardtail.

The Richardson 7 has two custom active humbuckers designed by Sterling. Plugging the guitar in, I quickly found metal tones that I liked. Sonically, the guitar accentuated the low and high registers, sacrificing a bit in the low-mids to get a tighter, scooped sound. This is not a criticism however, and I found that the pickups responded well to a tube amp with boatloads of gain. Even heavily saturated, the tone retained a clarity that was able to articulate complex chords, and help leads sing. The low end was also pronounced and aggressive, remaining dynamic and hi-impact for palm-muted pit riffs on the low strings.

I've seen some online comments describing these pickups as a bit too dark, even muddy. To be honest, I do not agree. The pups are plenty bright yet stop short of unpleasant fizziness. Perhaps I'm revealing here my preference for murkier death metal tones à la Entombed and Morbid Angel and am out of step with the desires of some other players. As tone is highly subjective, let your ears be the judge, but to me the pickups seem well-selected.

The clean sounds made by the Richardson 7 are transparent and useable. The attenuation of the midrange did less favours for the tone in this context, but the sound still retained a pleasant glassiness. Some judicious use of compression and reverb offset some of the flatness, and since the instrument is clearly designed to excel in heavier applications, some trade-off here is understandable.

For controlling your sound, the Richardson 7 has a three-way selector, plus the requisite tone and volume controls. The player can engage a coil tap and a volume boost by popping these two pots in and out of position. I really like how engaging and disengaging these functions is always done by pushing on the knob. This means the meat of the hand can be used to make the necessary switches in between busy playing.

The Richardson 7 hits a lot of the sweet spots that a modern metal guitarist needs. While it is not an absolute top-of-the-line instrument, plenty of that design philosophy has survived the design and build process that has led to a more affordable price.

A QUICK NOTE:

You might have seen that we also ran a review of the Ernie Ball Music Man Jason Richardson 7-String Cutlass in *Australian Guitar #142*. This was printed in error – the model featured in that review is not currently available in Australia. The one Alex Wilson has reviewed here, however, most certainly is. We apologise for this editorial stuff-up, and any inconveniences caused by it.

▶ VERDICT

The Richardson 7 would be a fine workhorse for a player who vibes with Richardson's style, or with modern metal in general. The major points of contention will be the bridge and the finish, but if those are your bag then you owe it to yourself to give this axe a go.

▶ PROS

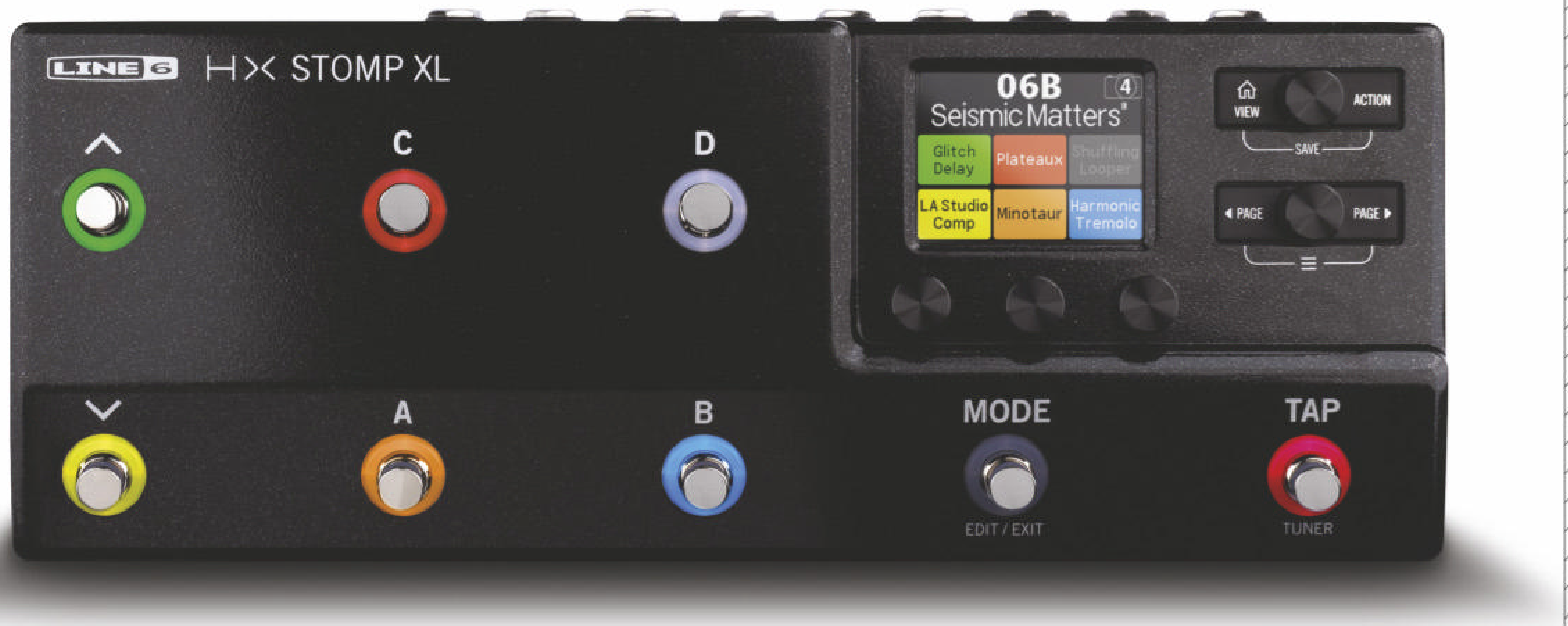
- Full of authentic metal tones.
- Does a great job adapting the $7K Ernie Ball model for a more affordable market.

▶ CONS

- Pickups might be a tad too dark or muddy for some.
- The aesthetic is an acquired taste.

▶ CONTACT

CMC Music
Ph: (02) 9905 2511
Web: cmcmusic.com.au



LINE 6 HX STOMP XL

RRP: $1,449

THE HX STOMP IS A STRIPPED-DOWN VERSION OF LINE 6'S HELIX, BUT THE XL VERSION ADDS A FEW FLASHY ACCESSORIES AND IMMEDIATELY CHANGES THE WHOLE VIBE. REVIEW BY **PETER HODGSON**.

Ever since the early days of multi-effects units, the market has understood that it makes good sense to offer the same basic product in a variety of simpler and more complex configurations. The Line 6 Helix is a revolutionary piece of kit, but if you need something much more stripped down, there's the adorable little HX Stomp, with a smaller footprint than most tablet computers but loaded with over 300 amps, cabs and effects from the Helix. It's a riotously fun piece of kit, limited only by its control configuration which is based on a trio of footswitches.

The HX Stomp, which uses those same great sounds and features as a starting point, sees you regarding Helix with envious eyes and decides to meet you halfway there with an expanded footswitch layout and more stageworthiness, and while the footprint of the unit is now longer, it's still a very small, portable unit that you can chuck in the front pocket of a gig bag. In fact probably the only thing missing now is a leather strap for you to bite down on and carry your HX Stomp XL into the gig in your mouth like a dog's chew-toy while you hold your guitar in one hand and a bag full of merch in the other.

The HX Stomp XL has the same SHARC DSP chip as the Helix, and it can run up to eight processing blocks at the same time. It does pretty much all the stuff you'd expect a state-of-the-art processor to do in 2021, but it addresses my only complaint about the diminutive little HX Stomp, which is the layout of the I/O.

The HX Stomp has inputs, outputs, USB and a expression pedal jack on the back edge of the unit, an effects loop on the right, and a headphone jack and MIDI In and OutThrough connections on the left. If you have a complicated setup and you're using most of those jacks with big 'ol chunky plugs to hook everything up, you've effectively wiped out a bunch of the unit's space-saving benefits. The HX Stomp XL takes all that stuff and puts it around the back, with no connections on the sides at all. Now it's easier to hook up your gear in four-cable method, connect other units via MIDI.

You still get the colour LCD display, capacitive-touch footswitches and colour-coded LED status rings found elsewhere in the Helix range, but compared to the HX Stomp's three multi-purpose buttons you get dedicated Menu Up and Down buttons, four assignable switches, a Mode switch (which doubles as Edit/Exit) and a Tap Tempo switch which also functions as the tuner button.

You get your choice of DSP or True Bypass, third-party IR support, USB connectivity, and audio interface capability (although a lot of players have reported finding the setup a bit fiddly when used in this way, so factor in a little extra setup time if you rock up to a recording situation on an unfamiliar computer).

All the expected amp and effect models are there, including a ridiculous number of distortion stomp boxes based on everything from the Analogman Prince of Tone to the Z.Vex Fuzz Factory. We can almost play the A-Z game with amps too, from the AC-15 to the Dr Z Route 66. There are also dozens of bass models, including Billy Sheehan's favourite Pearce BC-1, and a studio mic preamp model. Basically, it's all here and if you can't pull a great tone then you probably pissed off a demon somewhere along the line and that's on you.

So how's it sound? Well, godly of course, because Line 6 absolutely nails this stuff, with their Behavioural Modelling which replicates the unpredictable qualities of analog circuits, its great IR section (and yeah you can load external Impulse Responses too, of course: that's so obvious a feature that we probably don't need to spell it out when we talk IR). The capacitive touch switches mean you can use them as a form of expression pedal if you want to, which makes things really fun and physical.

I tried the HX Stomp XL in a variety of configurations including with powered speakers, as an interface in my DAW, direct into a combo's clean channel and in four-cable method with my Marshall DSL50 half-stack. Interesting to note: one of the output configurations in Line 6's literature shows the HX Stomp XL used in the loop of a line drawing of what is unmistakably a Kemper Rack. Line 6 is quietly but confidently saying, "We know you're gonna prefer our effects to theirs." Shots fired!

If you're the kind of player who rides their guitar's volume knob to vary your gain, the HX Stomp XL will feel immediately familiar and responsive. If you're a progressive metal player who likes everything compressed and heavily gated, it'll feel like exactly the kind of modern rig you want. And if you fall anywhere in between, like say you used to have a bunch of analog pedals but now you want something a little easier to maintain and transport, just think of this as a pedalboard.

▶ VERDICT

Whatever your need, the layout and I/O here makes more sense than the smaller HX Stomp and it'll integrate with more complex rigs with complete ease.

▶ PROS

- Convenient layout.
- Flexible signal routing options.
- The sound!

▶ CONS

- No 'reach and tweak' knobs.

▶ CONTACT

Yamaha Australia
Ph: (03) 9693 5111
Web: au.yamaha.com

FENDER AMERICAN ACOUSTASONIC JAZZMASTER

RRP: $3,999

WE'VE HAD TELECASTER AND STRATOCASTER VERSIONS, NOW COMES THE ACOUSTASONIC JAZZMASTER: THE BEST ACOUSTASONIC YET, TOR JUST A "ROWDY COUSIN"? WE FIND OUT...

REVIEW BY **DAVE BURRLUCK**.

If you've missed our coverage so far of the American Acoustasonic Tele and Strat, we'll recap here as this new Jazzmaster version is very much a sibling. The Acoustasonic might use the shape of those classic solidbodies, but it is an acoustic guitar first and foremost. It's also a Fender, so all three guitars are bolt-ons and have the Micro-Tilt adjustment (albeit it with four screws to secure the neck, rather than the two-screws-plus-bolt of the original '70s design), which is essential for setup when you have a non-adjustable acoustic-style pin bridge.

Although the guitars still employ the standard Fender scale length, the necks themselves break with tradition: mahogany, quarter-sawn for maximum stiffness, with a 22-fret ebony 'board and a flatter 305-millimetre (12-inch) Gibson-like radius. The mainstream neck shape is the same across all three, a modern deep C like Fender's American Professional II.

The body shells are again mahogany. Our Jazzmaster's is two-piece, finely centre-joined, with the grain of the two pieces diagonally matched. The thin (approximately three-millimetre) inset spruce top here is hidden under the deep grey Tungsten finish, one of five offered, which is edged with what looks like black/white/ black purfling. However, this entire top finish is a printed paint process including those stripes, which are not inlaid; it's the same with the rings around the small soundhole.

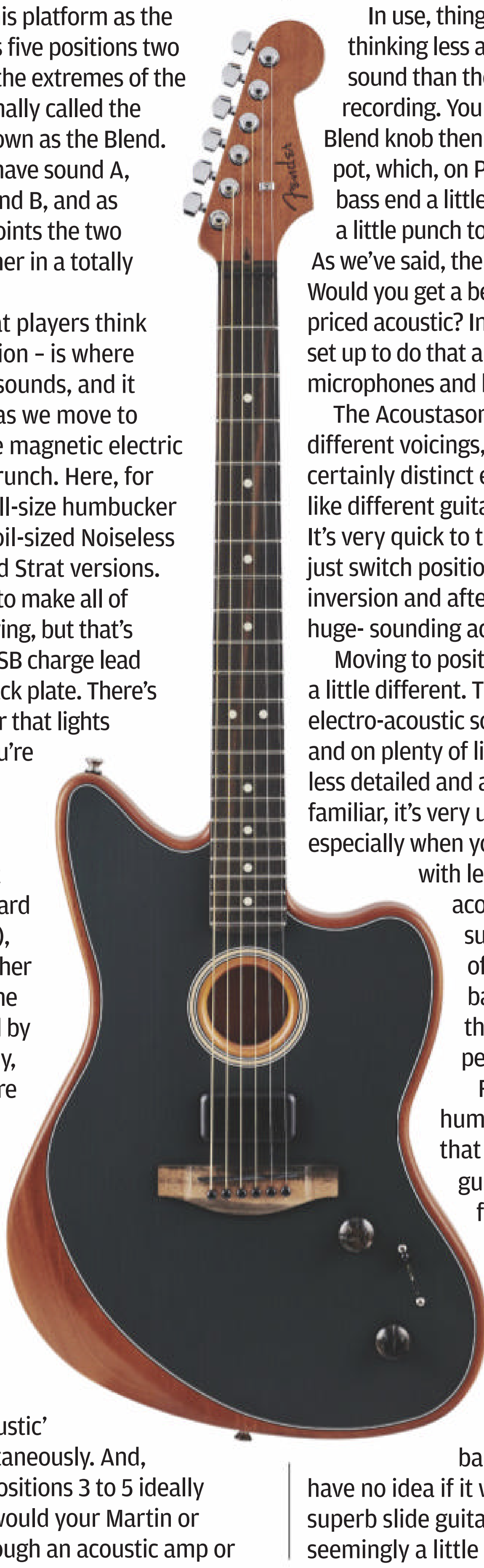
Despite the mainly hollow build, we still have a forearm and ribcage contour, although both are less extreme than you'd see on a '50s solidbody. Colour of the top aside, the guitar is natural finished – it feels almost *unfinished* like an oil process, and if anything the neck back, not to mention that forearm contour, feels more burnished than the two previous models we've played. Like any light satin finish, you can expect it to gloss up the more you play it.

That small sound hole – or, more accurately, sound port aka 'doughnut' – not only gives the Acoustasonic a very different appearance to any other mainstream electro-acoustic guitar we're aware of but actually tunes the acoustic response of the guitar: the start point of the design. It means that, despite its solidbody size and depth (45-millimetre), there's surprising volume unplugged, although the low-end is obviously a lot trimmer than even quite a small-bodied, thin-depth conventional acoustic. So, while the Acoustasonic is a rather good 'quiet' acoustic for home use, that's just scratching the surface of what's on offer here.

Is this Jazzmaster version the same as we've heard before, then? Yes and no. To backtrack, the guitars use a trio of pickups: an under-saddle transducer, a top sensor and a magnetic pickup. These three pickups are voiced in a stupidly simple manner via a five-way lever switch renamed for this platform as the Voice Selector. In each of its five positions two sounds can be accessed at the extremes of the lower rotary control – originally called the Mod knob and now also known as the Blend. So, fully anti-clockwise we have sound A, fully clockwise we have sound B, and as you move between those points the two sounds are morphed together in a totally unique fashion.

Position 5 – what us Strat players think of as the neck pickup position – is where we start with the acoustic sounds, and it all becomes more electric as we move to position 1, which voices the magnetic electric sounds with a little bit of crunch. Here, for the first time, we have a full-size humbucker as opposed to the single-coil-sized Noiseless humbuckers of the Tele and Strat versions.

The onboard electronics to make all of this possible do need powering, but that's done very discreetly via a USB charge lead that plugs into the output jack plate. There's a small LED charge indicator that lights when you plug in: green, you're fully charged; blinking red, you have about an hour's play time left. While it's the position 2 and 1 sounds that are new here (see the Onboard Sounds chart over the page), as Tim Shaw explains the other sounds that do feature on the Tele and Strat are enhanced by the bigger top area and body, which we're told "sends more acoustic information to the processor to create the warmest and most natural tone Fender have ever offered".



Now, unlike some 'hybrid' guitars (PRS's Hollowbody Piezo, for example), we only have a single mono output, which means you can't voice 'acoustic' and 'electric' sounds simultaneously. And, as Fender demonstrates, positions 3 to 5 ideally need to be treated as you would your Martin or Taylor electro-acoustic through an acoustic amp or PA. Position 1 should go into your electric amp, and Position 2, the Lo-Fi piezo sound, probably should be voiced into that electro-acoustic setting, but the same sound with some crunch could be either. The beauty of the design, though, is that you can do what you want – and Fender encourages you to do just that.

Before we start breaking the rules, however, we listen to the sounds via the above destinations. And then get completely lost. If there's a slightly plinky response from the acoustic voice it disappears coming out of our AER. Frankly, this writer would be happy with anything from positions 5 to 3. We're drawn to position 3 with a little of the body sensor 'tap' pickup brought in – it certainly suggests you're playing a bigger- sounding instrument than you are.

In use, things are so intuitive here that we're thinking less about the described style of the sound than the sound itself, certainly when we're recording. You might start on sound A on the Mod/ Blend knob then slowly move across the range of the pot, which, on Position 5 for example, cleans up the bass end a little. In position 4, doing the same brings a little punch to the quite wide-sounding jumbo. As we've said, the quality of the sounds is very good. Would you get a better sound from mic'ing a similarly priced acoustic? In theory, yes, but that assumes you're set up to do that and have a quiet environment, good microphones and know how to use them.

The Acoustasonic is totally plug-in-and-go. The different voicings, while hardly chalk a cheese, are certainly distinct enough from each other; they sound like different guitars at just the flick of a switch. It's very quick to track them while recording, too – just switch position and maybe change your chord inversion and after a couple of passes you have a huge- sounding acoustic bed.

Moving to position 2 is where things begin to get a little different. The Lo-Fi piezo setting is the sort of electro-acoustic sound we've heard for years at gigs and on plenty of live recordings. It's more electric, less detailed and a little strident, but not only is it familiar, it's very useful from a recording perspective, especially when you need to add a little sheen, with less body than the more accurate acoustic voices. The crunch is relatively subtle and actually reminds this writer of an old piezo with a slightly flat battery; it adds a little texture. Both these sounds really work with your pedalboard, too.

Finally, position 1 is the new humbucker, but it's worth remembering that it's a humbucker on an *acoustic* guitar, so running it through our AER, for example, or direct into our DAW, it's quite steel guitar-like but still with a little acoustic- like texture and string noise if you're not careful. Again, moving from voice A to B simply increases the crunch, so you just tailor that to the part you're playing – pull it back to clean up and vice versa. We have no idea if it was part of the design, but it's a superb slide guitar sound, too: rootsy and biting with seemingly a little compression. ▶

▶ VERDICT

For us, it's about the flexibility of the sounds on offer – as simple as that – and this Jazzmaster really stretches out. It's one of the most creative all-in-one musical tools we've encountered and completely blurs the lines between acoustic and electric.

▶ PROS

- Expanded body size, 'bigger' voices and new humbucker might make this the best Acoustasonic yet.

▶ CONS

- The Jazzmaster shape might be too big for some; for many, the Acoustasonic concept is just too new!

▶ CONTACT

Fender
Ph: (02) 8198 1300
Web: fender.com

Now, run this guitar through an electric amp and the fun *really* starts. Having gigged the Acoustasonic Telecaster in this mode, we'd suggest that things can get a little lively here. It's still a pretty resonant platform, but when it's used as a recording tool via our Line 6 Helix you can heap on gain, fuzz or both for your alt-rock or frankly fairly metal leanings.

You can watch all the YouTube demoes in the world, but actually getting one of these in your hands and working with it proves the immense validity of the Acoustasonic concept. Realistic acoustic sounds and credible electric voices are all easily accessed.

The actual guitar? That disappeared days ago: it's completely fit-for-purpose, stable and in tune, even though we might be tempted to drop down a gauge on the string front. Played acoustically, no, it doesn't capture the depth of the real thing, but it's perfectly engaging for quiet songwriting and practice.

CORT G300 PRO

RRP: $1,699

ASIDE FROM MAKING GUITARS FOR A HOST OF BRANDS INCLUDING PRS, CORT'S OWN ELECTRICS AND ACOUSTICS ARE MAKING SERIOUS WAVES. THIS NEW G300 PRO THROWS DOWN THE GAUNTLET.

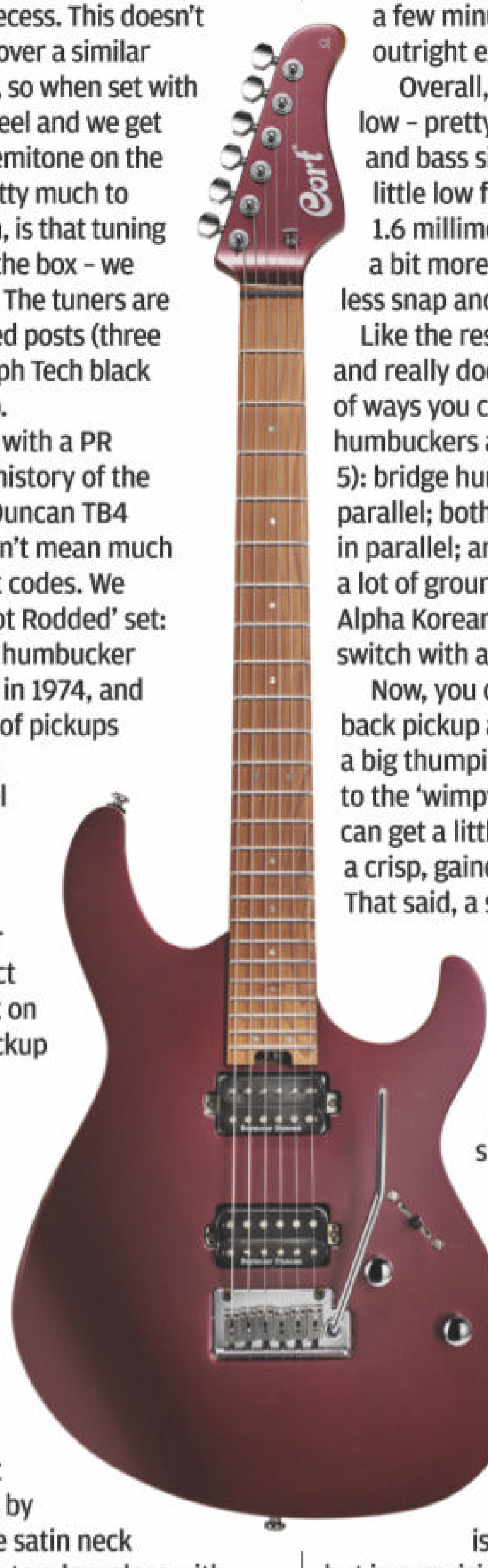
REVIEW BY **DAVE BURRLUCK**.

If you're serious about your guitars, you'll know that Cor-Tek produces instruments for numerous brands in its Indonesian super-factory. Not everyone wants to shout about that, of course, but plenty do, not least Manson Guitar Works here in the UK and Relish in Switzerland. PRS is also happy to praise its relationship with Cor-Tek in making its SE electric line; only in our last issue we gave a Cor-Tek-made PRS SE Custom 24-08 a 10-star Gold Award. Cor-Tek's own brand, Cort, predates this huge Indonesian facility, yet now there is proper UK distribution we're seeing more examples. We last caught up with Cort in issue 465 and here we've snagged one of the first of its new 2021 G Series models – and the electrics have some traction. The G300 Pro is the new flagship model and tops the mini- range, which starts at $1,699 with the G250.

The price doesn't include a gigbag and the cardboard shipping box doesn't exactly suggest the quality of the instrument inside. The thing is, however, this new G300 Pro is a hugely feature-led slice of modern guitar craft, the sort of instrument that covers a lot of ground without overly suggesting a specific genre or style. Admittedly, there's plenty that puts it in the 'modern progressive' pigeonhole if you listen to guitars from their specification sheets. We have a compound radius fingerboard, big ol' stainless-steel frets and those see-in-the-dark Luminlay side dots that are essential for prog rockers and their sparsely lit performance spaces. Back in the day we'd have called this a 'SuperStrat', pure and simple.

Like Eddie Van Halen's first Music Man signature, the body under that slightly metallic opaque finish is American basswood, with a 6-millimetre maple top and its edges left natural. Its slightly elongated Strat-inspired outline hardly brings any new concepts to the fray, but the ribcage and forearm contours – not to mention the rounded neck heel with inset neck screws – all aid the form. It really doesn't get in your way and, with a good light weight, feels great strapped on or seated.

The vibrato here is based closely on Gotoh's modern classic 510 and has a machined-steel block, steel baseplate and block stainless-steel saddles with two pivot posts and push-in arm with tension adjustment at the collar. It appears to be set flush with the top of the body until you notice the recess. This doesn't actually increase the up-bend over a similar vibrato with a Fender-style tilt, so when set with just two springs, it has a light feel and we get a minor third on the G and a semitone on the high E, while down bend is pretty much to slack. What we will say, though, is that tuning stability is superb right out of the box – we didn't even stretch the strings. The tuners are rear locking and have staggered posts (three different heights), and the Graph Tech black Tusq nut is clearly doing its job.



But Cort could probably do with a PR person who understands the history of the electric guitar. The Seymour Duncan TB4 and SH-2 humbucker set doesn't mean much unless you know your product codes. We have what Duncan calls its 'Hot Rodded' set: "Seymour created this classic humbucker combination while in England in 1974, and it remains his favourite set of of pickups to this day: an SH-4 JB for the bridge and a SH-2n Jazz Model for the neck. Together these pickups have become one of the most timeless and versatile humbucker sets ever built." Both appear to be direct mounted, but they actually sit on foam so you can tweak the pickup heights if you need to.

If the neck specification suggests a certain style, then the actual neck here is really quite full and feels quite 'old Fender' if we're honest. It has a slim but not skinny depth in the lower positions, measuring 21.6 millimetres at the first fret, and a D-style profile with quite full shoulders, filling out to almost old-Tele dimensions by the 12th at 24 millimetres. The satin neck back will undoubtedly burnish to a low gloss with playing, but you can't help thinking a quick rub with a Scotch-Brite pad at the factory would just break it in a bit for a slightly slinkier feel.

The fingerboard edges are slightly rounded and, despite the apparently 'flat' fingerboard camber, it feels quite mainstream. The stainless-steel frets could fit into the narrow/tall category, too: they're nicely installed, although a little more polishing of the tops would prevent the slightly scratchy feel as you bend, especially on the wound strings. It's just a few minutes away from turning good into outright exceptional.

Overall, the supplied setup is flawless and low – pretty much 1.3 millimetres on both treble and bass sides, as supplied. To be honest, that's a little low for us, and raising the string heights to 1.6 millimetres on both sides at the 12th fret felt a bit more universal and gave the strings attack less snap and more air.

Like the rest of the design, the drive is simple and really doesn't get in the way. There are plenty of ways you can wire a pair of four-conductor humbuckers and here we get (from positions 1 to 5): bridge humbucker; screw single coils of both in parallel; both humbuckers; slug single coils of both in parallel; and neck humbucker. It certainly covers a lot of ground. The circuit is simple with 500k Alpha Korean mini pots and a four-pole, five-way switch with a .033 microfarads tone cap.

Now, you could probably have a career on the back pickup alone. The JB is a real classic, hot with a big thumping midrange bark, quite the antidote to the 'wimpy' PAF. Pull the volume back and it can get a little indistinct, but if you're running into a crisp, gained amp voicing that's little problem. That said, a simple treble-bleed circuit would be an easy and cheap upgrade. But there's plenty more to explore here and both parallel mixes not only thin out the voice but add Fender-y funk and bounce. The wide-spaced screw coils sound a little more 'Tele', the closer slugs coil hints more at a Strat's mix, while the more scooped Jazz at the neck is almost a halfway between those and the JB's thickness. And just like the JB, the Jazz has a useful voice, clean enough for almost single-coil-like clarity on those soupy leads and snappy enough for some funkier blues or jazz comping with clean and crunch amp voices. The dual humbucker mix is perhaps less suited to gained sounds but is surprisingly wide and full with a little snappy clarity on cleaner amp settings.

▶ VERDICT

In a different modern bolt-on style, the G300 Pro is a difficult guitar to fault – it's the sort of instrument that spans pretty much every rock genre there is and quite a bit more, although it does veer towards generic in style.

▶ PROS

- Superb feature-led build for the money: roasted maple neck, stainless-steel frets and Seymour Duncan pickups.

▶ CONS

- Colour choice isn't great and there's no gigbag. But do we care?

▶ CONTACT

Dynamic Music
Ph: (02) 9939 1299
Web: dynamicmusic.com.au

EPIPHONE INSPIRED BY GIBSON J-45 AND J-200

RRP: $1,799 (J-45)
$2,299 (J-200)

EPIPHONE KNOCKS IT OUT OF THE PARK WITH TWO GIBSON RE-DOS THAT CAPTURE ALL OF THE ORIGINALS' SPARK.

REVIEW BY **PAUL RIARIO**.

Following in Gibson's towering reputation for impeccable craftsmanship, Epiphone has recently taken a lockstep approach in vastly improving their Gibson-counterpart line of guitars by debuting "Epiphone Inspired by Gibson," an extensive collection of iconic acoustic and electric instruments designed from the original Gibson blueprints.

I zeroed in on the remarkable J-45 and J-200 acoustics – a sloped shoulder and a super jumbo, respectively – from the "Epiphone Inspired By Gibson" Acoustic Collection, which also consists of the J-45 EC, Hummingbird and Hummingbird 12-string.

Both guitars share all solid-wood construction, quarter-sawn spruce bracing, tapered dovetail neck joint, Indian Laurel (similar to rosewood) fingerboard with 20 medium jumbo frets, 1.69-inch (43-millimetre) nut width and Fishman Sonicore under-saddle pickup and Sonitone preamp electronics with soundhole-mounted volume and tone controls.

Known as "The Workhorse," the J-45's classic sloped-shouldered dreadnought shape features solid mahogany for its back and sides, four-ply ivory and black binding for the top and one-ply ivory binding for the back, and a Sitka spruce top. The mahogany neck has a 24.72-inch-scale length with a comfortably rounded C-shape profile and a '60s-style Kalamazoo headstock shape. Other appointments include a reverse-belly Indian Laurel bridge, J-45 shape Tortoise Shell pickguard, ivory button tuners and an aged vintage sunburst finish.

The J-200 lives up to its moniker as the "King of the Flat-Tops" with its super jumbo non-cutaway solid figured maple body, six-ply binding for the top and four-ply binding on the back, and a Sitka spruce top. The two-piece maple neck with a mahogany centre strip has a 25.55-inch-scale length with a rounded C-shape profile that's noticeably slimmer than the J-45. Its standout visual appointments include a Moustache bridge with curved block inlays, crown headstock inlay and graduated crown mother-of-pearl fingerboard inlays, a J-200 style pickguard with two-colour floral motif and an aged antique natural gloss colour finish.

The "Inspired by Gibson" handle for the J-45 and J-200 is apropos here, because to my eyes, Epiphone went to great lengths in authentically recreating the overall vibe and aesthetic of these iconic acoustics. Despite the striking resemblance to the original models, one of the best and most palpable attributes both acoustics share is the aged gloss finish.

The high-gloss tackiness that plagues most budget guitars is now replaced by a soft and supple aged finish that wholeheartedly contributes to an inviting playing feel. With its Cadillac proportions and ornate appointments, the J-200 is undoubtedly the showstopper of the two, commanding authority with its booming, woody voice and wonderful low action.

In contrast to the noble J-200, the J-45 has less snobby appeal with bourgeoise looks, folksy playability and a stripped-down resonant tone. And it'll be no surprise that this J-45 might be the enduring favourite among strummers and fingerpickers with its effluence of low-mids that truly shape its punchy voice.

Now, I wouldn't categorise either acoustic as warm-sounding, because there is a definitive high-end crispness on both that reveals their newness. Still, at their respective affordable price points, the J-45 and J-200 are fantastic players that will eventually sound warmer with age and time spent playing them. And isn't that the point?

▶ VERDICT

The Epiphone Inspired by Gibson J-45 and J-200 closely capture the irresistible tones and appealing mojo of the originals at prices that won't break the bank.

▶ PROS

- Gibson quality at Epiphone prices.
- Soft and supple aged finishes.
- Fantastic playability all 'round.

▶ CONS

- None.

▶ CONTACT

Australis Music Group
Ph: (02) 9698 4444
Web: innovativemusic.com.au

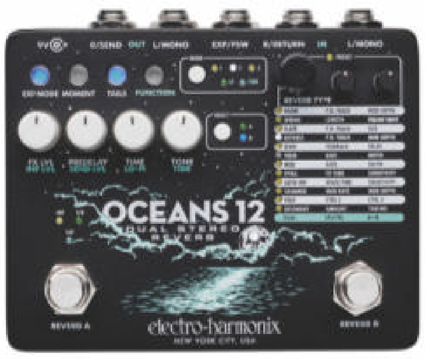
ELECTRO-HARMONIX OCEANS 12 DUAL STEREO REVERB

EHX BUILDS ON ITS PREVIOUS OCEANS REVERB – THIS ONE GOES TO 12! REVIEW BY **TREVOR CURWEN**.

RRP: $695

When we took a look at the Oceans 11, we were aware that its lack of stereo outputs could be a dealbreaker for some potential users. Now, Electro-Harmonix is back with a version that can not only run in stereo if required, but actually features two simultaneous, independent stereo reverb engines – A and B – which can run in series, or parallel should you wish to use both together.

If you prefer to operate in mono, the spare input and output can be used as a send/return loop either pre- or post-reverb, so you can add in another pedal to alter the reverb sound. There are, of course, 12 different reverb types to choose from here, each with two instantly accessible program-dependent parameters as listed on the front panel. Each type also has two or three variations known as modes; the tremolo reverb, for instance, can have triangle, square or sine waves.



There is also a bunch of general adjustments for each, specifically via four white knobs that have dual functions. These cover eight parameters including pre-delay and reverb time, but there is also a Tide control for stereo image alteration and a Lo-fi control for a grainier tail texture.

An accessible Tails switch determines whether the reverb effect fades out naturally or cuts out abruptly on bypass. Your created sounds can be stored in 24 presets – 12 for reverb A and 12 for reverb B – but these are limited to one for each reverb type.

The 12 single reverbs offer everything from a twangy emulation of a vintage Fender 6G15 outboard spring unit, through reverb combined with echo or modulation, to infinite shimmery ambiences – plenty to cover most needs without even getting into the intriguing combinations possible from using two together. Add in some very useful performance features – such as expression pedal capability, optional momentary footswitch action, tap tempo, plus the infinite reverbs that can be played over with a different reverb effect – and you have a very flexible pedal.

▶ VERDICT

With two independent or combinable reverbs in a pedal that won't take up much space at all on your 'board, this is a potent ambience tool at a decent price.

▶ PROS

- Compact size.
- Two reverb engines.
- Eclectic range of reverb types
- Plenty of editable parameters.

▶ CONS

- Hands-on operation can be somewhat fiddly.
- Limitations in how presets are configured..

▶ CONTACT

Vibe Music
Web: vibemusic.com.au

VICTORY
V40
VOLUME
TREBLE
MIDDLE
BASS
REVERB
MASTER
INPUT
The Duchess
LOW

VICTORY V40 THE DUCHESS

AN ELEGANTLY DESIGNED, TIDILY HAND-WIRED, NEATLY COMPACT AND ROADWORTHY LUNCHBOX AMP. REVIEW BY **PAUL RIARIO**.

RRP: $1,999

What do players like Richie Kotzen, Guthrie Govan and Rabea Massaad have in common? The many outstanding tones you may have heard on their recordings and live appearances come courtesy of Victory Amplifiers – a UK brand that's fast becoming a rising star among boutique amplifier companies.

Victory is the brainchild of chief designer Martin Kidd (of Cornford amplifiers fame) together with a team of engineers that hand-build these colourful, distinctively voiced amps. Scrolling through Victory's diverse tube-amp series will reveal their amps come in the classic big-box deluxe head format or as a portable lunchbox head, along with matching speaker cabinet options. They also recast versions of their amp series in powered or preamp pedals, but as far as combos, there are only three as of this writing.

For this review, I was able to check out the V40; and while it's not the company's latest offering, I chose "The Duchess" for its detailed American and British voicings, and as an introduction to the fantastic amplifiers Victory is producing.

For a lunchbox-styled amp that's elegantly designed, tidily hand-wired and neatly compact, the roadworthy V40is a breath of fresh air to lug around at a lightweight 8.3 kilos. But don't be fooled by its weight class; the "Duchess" packs a powerful punch as a 42-watt, single-channel amp driven by a pair of EL34 tubes (that can also be swapped for 6L6 tubes) and three 12AX7 preamp tubes. Its broad tone-shaping options are accessed via a two-position Voice switch (Voice I and II) and Mid-Kick switch, and a footswitchable digital reverb with hard bypass switch.

The large stovetop-style controls for Volume, Treble, Middle, Bass, Reverb and Master have a smooth taper and feel substantial on your fingertips. The amp's front panel standby switch can be flicked to full power or low power (seven watts); and you can select either power tube for Class A operation in single-ended mode (on rear panel) when in low-power operation, which together will take the output down below one-watt RMS. Other features include a series effects loop with hard bypass, rear-panel power switch, speaker outs for 16-ohm and dual eight-ohm (wired in parallel) and reverb footswitch jack. The amp comes complete with a padded carrying case and footswitch for reverb.

The V40's tonal wheelhouse sits in the clean-to-mildly-dirty range, and it's probably the most warmly transparent amplifier I've ever encountered. Also, if multiple stompboxes are your primary source of tone-shaping when using it, you won't be able to wipe the grin off your face when you hear how well pedals perfectly complement the V40.

The controls react exactly as intended; dialling back volume and upping the master sets up gorgeous cleans, and cranking both volume and master will nudge the amp towards musically rich overdrive, but it's all about how you wish to voice it: setting all controls midway, with Voice I activated and the Master relatively low, and auditioning both open-back 2-by-12 and 4-by-12 cabinets (loaded with Celestion Creambacks and V-Type speakers respectively), the V40 draws out the classic soft and supple tones reminiscent of mid-'60s Fender combos, albeit at a much louder clip.

Players who dabble between jazz and blues will find all the sustain and touch sensitivity become glaringly present here at full power, where the amp blooms with a natural compression that smooths the highs and firms up the mids and low end. Flicking the switch over to Voice II and increasing the volume ramps up some gritty bite that closely duplicates the snappy attack of Tweed-era amps when using single-coils, and downing the Mid-Kick switch easily ups the ante in aggression for humbuckers.

Low power mode certainly tames the output by adding some compressed squish, and if you like that cushioned tone, you'll dig how loose it feels. What's more, the built-in digital reverb is so beautifully ambient in its hybrid hall-meets-plate sounds, you'll almost forget you can remove it from the circuit entirely – but really, it's so lush you'll want it on all the time.

The amp is enthralling in just about all it does, so if it lacks anything it would be high-end sparkle, which is not a bad thing and may only be a matter of swapping to 6L6 tubes and Alnico speakers to possibly remedy that. Regardless, I can genuinely declare the V40 is an even-tempered clean machine with balance and bite, and frankly, I'd choose this amp over anything else when faced with the many standard backline choices.

▶ VERDICT

The Duchess coaxes a wide range of low-to-medium drive tones and silky cleans that sound massive on their own, or further enhanced when combined with stompboxes as a pedal platform.

▶ PROS

- Two voicing options, all on one channel.
- A Mid-Kick switch pushes the amp to overdriven British blues-rock tones.

▶ CONS

- Lacks some high-end sparkle.

▶ CONTACT

Gladesville Guitar Factory
Ph: (02) 9817 2173
Web: guitarfactory.net

CARL MARTIN PLEXIRANGER

FOOTSWITCHABLE CONTROL FOR THE CLASSIC SOUND OF A TREBLE-BOOSTED BRIT AMP. REVIEW BY **TREVOR CURWEN**.

OUTPUT
REMOTE
9V DC
INPUT
LO-CUT
0
1
2
GAIN
BOOST
TONE
FREQ
LEVEL
RANGE
PLEXIRANGER
PLEXI
BOOST
CARL MARTIN
DESIGNED IN DENMARK

RRP: CONTACT DISTRIBUTOR

The combination of vintage British amp and treble booster (Dallas Rangemaster, et al) as put into practice by the likes of Tony Iommi, Rory Gallagher and Brian May is a shoo-in recipe for a classic rock sound.

It makes sense, then, to put a British amp-flavoured overdrive and a booster into the same pedal. And that's just what Carl Martin has done here with the aptly named PlexiRanger, a pedal that provides separately footswitchable drive and boost sections that can be used independently or in tandem. The right-hand side of the pedal takes care of boost functions as well as low-end attenuation with a Lo-Cut switch. This switch offers two levels of bottom-end roll-off that work really well for taking the murk out of your tone or taming the excesses of a 4-by-12 cab. Up to 15 decibels of pure clean volume boost is delivered by the Boost knob, but if you want some tonal shift, you can find your desired frequency via the wide-ranging Freq knob and use the Range knob to set how much you want it boosted by.

There are plenty of options, from a tonal sweetening with minimal added boost through powerful, tightly targeted, tonally shaped boosts whether fat, throaty or toppy to get your amp singing. It works a treat with our vintage Vox AC30 and Marshall JMP50, bringing in a richness with just the right amount of extra treble combined with a front-end push. We don't all have vintage British amps, though, and that's where the pedal's other half comes in. Carl Martin is known for its Marshall-flavoured Plexi drive pedals, and one of those is exactly what you get in this pedal's left-hand section.

This is classy overdrive from almost clean to driven raunch with plenty of top-end adjustable via the Tone knob. While the Plexi side doesn't get into high-gain territory by itself, kicking in the boost adds an extra dimension to the sound, bringing out the harmonics, and can really get it screaming.

▶ VERDICT

This is a versatile pedal that would be worth the money for either one of its two footswitchable effects. But getting both together in one package makes it a really solid buy as an eminently practical pedalboard workhorse.

▶ PROS

- Drive and boost in a single pedal.
- Independent footswitching for both effects.
- Classic sound revisited.
- Practical range of frequencies for the boost.

▶ CONS

- None

▶ CONTACT

Innovative Music
Ph: (03) 9540 0685
Web: innovativemusic.com.au

OUTPUT
GAIN
BLEND
TONE
OUT
IN
MXR
FOD

MXR M251 FOD DRIVE

RRP: $395

MXR REBRANDS THE DOOKIE DRIVE WITH THIS VERSATILE AMP-BLENDING OVERDRIVE.

REVIEW BY **TREVOR CURWEN**.

MXR's Dookie Drive pedal was based on the rig of modified Marshalls that Billie Joe Armstrong used on Green Day's third album. It had the basic aim of putting the sound of two amp stacks in a single housing with options for blending the two – and that's exactly what the new M251 FOD Drive is designed to do, albeit with no artist affiliation and the option of a toggle-switched midrange boost, plus a scoop and a flat setting.

A Blend knob sets the mix between the two sounds. To the right is the High Gain channel, with Gain controlled by a the front-panel knob while to the left is the Crunch Gain channel with internal set-and-forget trimmers for its gain and volume if you want to deviate from the factory settings.

Both sides have the flavour of a nicely cranked stack and each individually has a range of useful tones whether you're looking for rhythmic graunch or saturated leads. It's the combinations, though, that give the pedal its signature voicing and these are where you can dial in really rich tones that combine saturation and sustain with an extra edge of clarity from the Crunch side. Tailored EQ and extra boost from the Output knob add to the options.

VERDICT

The FOD does a neat job in combining two different but complementary overdrive flavours and the controls you need to blend them.

PROS	CONS
Compact MXR format.	Four-screw battery access.
Good price.	
FOD offers rich overdrive tones.	

CONTACT

Australasian Music Supplies
Ph: (03) 9549 1500
Web: austmusic.com.au

GAIN
PUSH TO CYCLE
MXR
BIAS
REVO
OPTO
SQR
HARM
SPEED
DEPTH
OUT
IN
MXR
CTR
tremolo

MXR M305 TREMOLO

RRP: $329

AN ULTRA-VERSATILE TREMOLO PEDAL IN A COMPACT PACKAGE.

REVIEW BY **TREVOR CURWEN**.

The M305 Tremolo pedal replaces the discontinued M159 Tremolo model, which launched in 2008 and ran at 18 volts, necessitating the use of two batteries or another arrangement. This new iteration runs more conveniently from a single nine-volt power source, can run in mono or stereo, and features six different trem types scrolled through by pushing the Gain knob.

There are standard Speed and Depth controls, and that Gain knob can not only compensate for the perceived volume drop that the effect can engender, but also give you a boost to drive an amp a little harder. One tremolo type, MXR, recreates the pulsing of the previous M159's sine wave trem, plus, still in the vintage amp-style, you get the softer flavoured Bias and Opto types. Revo is an optical tremolo with a reversed waveform for a slightly harder edged attack, something that finds its full expression in the square wave trem's choppy on/off effects.

Finally, there's the Harmonic tremolo that recreates the phase-y sound of a rarer type of vintage amp trem. A very cool envelope mode allows tremolo speed to be determined by the intensity of your playing, put to great effect with a trem that slows right down as a chord fades out. Other performance options include connection of a tap tempo footswitch or expression pedal, which is able to blend between two settings to incorporate all three of the front-panel knobs.

VERDICT

The M305 offers a pretty comprehensive set of tremolo sounds in a compact footprint with plenty of performance options.

PROS	CONS
Comprehensive and dynamic.	Four-screw battery access.
Handy boost function.	

CONTACT

Australasian Music Supplies
Ph: (03) 9549 1500
Web: austmusic.com.au

MXR M299 CARBON COPY MINI

RRP: $345

THE CC MINI IS UNPARALLELED IF YOU NEED TO NAIL WIDE SLAPBACK ECHO OR SAIL ON CASCADING WAVES OF WET DELAY.

REVIEW BY **PAUL RIARIO**.

Outside of the smaller housing, the Carbon Copy Mini Analog Delay is nearly identical to its Carbon Copy big brother with a bucket-brigade circuit, an all-analog signal path and 600ms of delay time. It also has the same rugged footswitch, top-mounted controls for Regen, Mix and Delay and Mod (Modulation) on/off switch with orange LED.

What's new is the aforementioned Bright voicing that accentuates the high-end frequencies, similar to the Carbon Copy Bright Delay for enhanced presence and clarity. There are also two internal trim pots to adjust the Speed and Width of the modulation so you can set-and-forget the type of warbly echo or drippy chorused vibrato you wish to hear in the CC Mini's repeats. The CC Mini is true bypass, powered only via a nine-volt DC adapter.

There's no need to overthink the CC Mini. It's exactly the same pedal as its sparkly green predecessor, but with the added versatility of featuring a Bright switch to engage a more defined and clearer-toned echo. It has all the lovely analog warmth in its cloud-soft repeats that breathe dimension to your guitar tone, especially in the Bright voicing. In its original mode, the CC Mini mimics the darkly textured repeats of the Carbon Copy, which adds a shroud of ambience to solos and pick chug.

MIX
REGEN
DELAY
MXR
MOD
carbon copy

The effect of the Mod switch sounds wonderfully thick and shimmery if you're going for density in sound. The only thing that takes getting used to are the smaller knobs where I needed to be more precise in setting up the delay time and repeats because the taper on the pots are tightly wound. But once you have set your controls, they're not moving.

VERDICT

The MXR Carbon Copy Mini Analog Delay is a sonic beast with built-in modulation, 600ms of warm delay and a bright voicing.

PROS	CONS
All the punch of the full-sized model.	Smaller knobs are fiddly.

CONTACT

Australasian Music Supplies
Ph: (03) 9549 1500
Web: austmusic.com.au

BOSS GT-1000CORE
GUITAR EFFECTS PROCESSOR
OUTPUT LEVEL
IN
♩=120 ●
OUT
U001
PREMIUM DRIVE
GAIN 70
BASS 80
TREBLE 50
BPM 120
PATCH LV 100
EFFECT
MENU
WRITE
EXIT
LOCK
SELECT
1
2
3
4
5
A·I·R·D
▼
▲
CTL 1
TUNER
MANUAL

BOSS GT-1000CORE

RRP: $1,199

BOSS SQUEEZES ALL THE POWER OF ITS FLAGSHIP PROCESSOR INTO A MUCH MORE COMPACT FOOTPRINT.

REVIEW BY **TREVOR CURWEN**.

When Boss introduced the flagship GT-1000 amp modelling and multi-effects floorboard a couple of years back it signified a major refresh for the long-running GT series, ushering in a number of features: an ultra-fast DSP engine, 32-bit operation and 96kHz sampling rate as well as AIRD (Augmented Impulse Response Dynamics) technology, designed for more realistic amp simulations and optimised integration with whatever's next in the chain.

Although more streamlined than the previous GT models, the original GT-1000 still has the form factor typical of a large floorboard unit, which will not appeal to every potential user, despite its tempting sound and facilities.

Fortunately, now there's a way for some of those users to buy into the sounds and facilities without the cumbersome footprint: the GT-1000Core delivers the complete internal tone processing of the GT-1000 in a stompbox.

It's pretty much the same form factor as Boss' 500 series pedals – basically not much bigger that a couple of Boss compact pedals plugged in side by side – making it an obvious contender to add a massive amount of flexibility to even the most compact of pedalboards or to sit unobtrusively on a tabletop for recording or practice. Equipped with three footswitches, the GT-1000Core sports 500 onboard patches (250 preset and 250 user), an onboard looper (38 seconds mono), and a tuner.

A USB connection allows the unit to function as a six-in/six-out audio interface for recording and re-amping and to access the free computer-based Boss Tone Studio editing program. The Tone Studio is also available in iOS and Android apps for mobile devices but the GT-1000Core won't connect via Bluetooth like its big brother.

Each of the patches is made up from 24 simultaneous effects blocks with various series and parallel routing options available. You can have two of the modelled amps in a patch and/or a variety of effects. All told there are 23 amps comprising Boss original creations and emulations of familiar classics, and over 100 effects including some classic Boss pedal effects, effects directly ported from the 500 series, and models of vintage stompboxes.

You're not limited to just what's onboard the GT-1000Core, however, as two send/return loops enable integration of external effects pedals directly into the internal signal chain, so you can add in your favourite fuzz, for example, and have the option of assigning it to one of the unit's footswitches if desired.

Editing from the front panel is painless and the soft knobs offer instant quick tweaks, but we gravitated to the mouse-driven ease of the full-colour software editor for building original presets. A range of selectable output types tailors the sound for whatever comes next in the chain. When using a full signal chain with amp/cab simulation engaged, it's impressive just how responsive the unit is with a natural push/pull in the playing feel.

There are amps to cover all types of electric guitar music, each paired with the appropriate cabinet, although if you set the unit to Recording mode you can chop and change cabs, choosing from a variety of built-in speaker and microphone types. If you load your own Impulse Responses, the unit can store up to 16 of them. For use as a source of effects in front of your amp and/or in its effects loop (the unit supports the four-cable method), there are all the everyday effects sitting next to the esoteric, so it's possible to build a series of well-stocked eclectic 'pedalboards' for live use.

While the Core's sonic credentials are identical to its larger namesake and its compact size confers certain advantages, there's no getting round the fact that the practicality of having 10 footswitches has been compromised. Nevertheless, there's a lot you can do with three footswitches. There are two basic modes of operation for them, Memory and Manual, switched between by pressing the second (middle) and CTL 1 footswitch simultaneously.

In Memory mode, the first two footswitches scroll through and select patches while the CTL 1 footswitch can be assigned to whatever you want in a patch, perhaps tap tempo, switching parallel signal paths or simple effect bypass duty. Switching between patches is remarkably seamless, especially if you set up two very similar patches with delay/reverb carry over.

For onstage switching, many may prefer to pick a patch with all the necessary sounds for a song and operate the unit in Manual mode where the footswitches can select functions that are assigned to them in the currently loaded patch. This allows them all to be used to switch individual effects in and out: in conventional pedalboard action, you may wish for instant access to three effects – a preferred modulation effect, drive and delay, perhaps.

Beyond this, though, the unit has a real flexibility in assigning a host of different functions to the footswitches with both toggle and momentary action, letting you really customise how you use it. Should you need more switching and control, there are two inputs that can host more footswitches and assignable expression pedals. What's more, there's 'control out' provision for switching amp channels and control of (or control by) other MIDI devices in your rig.

With such a great variety of Boss effects, the GT-1000Core is a shoo-in if you're looking to expand the capability of an existing pedalboard, but also a great starting point to build a 'board around, making use of those practical send/return loops. It can function wonderfully in a standalone capacity, too, and has that amp/effects/speaker sim in one box 'fly rig' capability, fitting easily into your guitar case if you're travelling light.

We did find that time spent dialling in tones and setting input sensitivity to suit your guitar really raised the authenticity and feel of the sounds over the decent factory presets. Away from gigs it's there to record either raw or fully polished guitar sounds, or always available for plugging in a set of headphones and getting down to some practice at home or in the studio. Boss has taken the guts of the GT-1000 and created a compact powerhouse that will take care of many, many needs.

▶ VERDICT

The Boss GT-1000Core might have fewer footswitches than its full-sized sibling but it doesn't lack for options. Its vast array of effects and amp models allied to send and returns for your other stompboxes makes it a powerful tool, either as a fly-rig, a recording tool, or as part of a larger pedalboard setup.

▶ PROS

- GT-1000 power in a compact footprint.
- Huge range of effects.
- Send/returns for external pedal integration.
- USB audio interface.
- Computer-based editing.

▶ CONS

- USB cable not supplied.

▶ CONTACT

Roland Australia
Ph: (02) 9982 8266
Web: roland.com/au

RRP: $749

BLACKSTAR CARRY-ON DELUXE PACK

A TRAVEL-SIZED ELECTRIC GUITAR AND BLACKSTAR FLY3 PRACTICE AMP TWOFER THAT'LL GIVE ANY PLAYER A LITTLE WANDERLUST.

REVIEW BY **DAVE BURRLUCK**.

In what is probably the most hopeful product launch of 2021 so far, Blackstar has announced the Carry-On travel guitar. It's certainly a forward-thinking introduction and here's hoping we'll be able to travel somewhere before the end of the year! Timing aside, the Carry-On is a credible example of the downsized travel guitar.

Designed in the UK by Blackstar in association with the master luthiers at Gordon Smith Guitars, and made in China, it's certainly small, centring on a 527-millimetre (20.7-inch) scale length and a ukulele-sized body that measures approximately 211 millimetres across the lower bouts; body depth is 39.5 millimetres.

It has a natural matte finish to the back, sides and neck, and the top is not only glossed but also bound with a tortoiseshell-like plastic. The same plastic is used to bind the fingerboard and around the lightly back-angled headstock, which features full-sized enclosed tuners.

Overall length is 747 millimetres and it weighs just 1.79 kilos. The Carry-On is made from okoume and has a 19-fret laurel fingerboard. The fret gauge falls into medium-to-jumbo territory and the fret tops are pretty well-fettled, the fret ends actually sitting over the edge binding.

Despite the reduced scale-length and the miniature size, the neck is actually full size with a conventional nut width that measures 43.43 millimetres and a neck width of 52.2 millimetres by the 12th fret. The well-shaped full C profile has a depth of 20.2 millimetres at the first fret and 23 millimetres by the tenth fret, before the neck curves into a pretty classic domed heel.

Clearly, then, this is a set-neck guitar, the neck joining the single-cut body just past the 15th fret. The string gauge is heavier than you might be used to (0.012 to 0.054), but this extra weight compensates for the short scale, even though the perceived tension veers on the slightly floppier side.

That said, with regular string spacing (35-millimetre at the nut, 51.5-millimetre at the tune-o-matic bridge) it really plays rather well and there's even a wheel-style truss-rod adjuster at the base of the neck to ensure the optimum setup, while the strings are anchored through the body in offset Tele-style ferrules.

Sound-wise, it does sound like an electric guitar – certainly good enough for practice. There's not excessive bite, you'll find a reasonable depth to the voice, the coil-split is rather good and the volume and tones work effectively. Pint-sized but pokey!

▶ VERDICT

Small but perfectly credible, the Carry-On is a fun little guitar that's dead serious when it comes to practice. This and the Fly 3 makes a great little on-the-go practice rig

▶ PROS

- Simple design, well-executed.
- Very portable, uke-sized proportions.
- More than respectable tones for practice.
- Good value.

▶ CONS

- Not much, but it lacks a little bite.

▶ CONTACT

CMI Music & Audio
Ph: (03) 9315 2244
Web: cmi.com.au

Pocket GT
01
MEMORY
VALUE
GAIN
OD/DS
LEVEL
MOD
REVERB
DELAY
SELECT
TUNER/EXIT
BOSS

BOSS POCKET GT

RRP: $419

THE POCKET-SIZED AMP MODELLER THAT UNLOCKS YOUTUBE.

REVIEW BY **STUART WILLIAMS**.

The new Pocket GT from Boss is a practice tool designed for right now. At its core, it's a compact effects processor/amp modeller offering over 100 models derived from the Boss GT-1, but the Pocket GT is also equipped with USB in order to work as your audio interface for recording your guitar to a computer. Completing the trifecta of sound, USB and wireless is Bluetooth connectivity, allowing you to hook the Pocket GT up to your phone.

As we've already established, this is fast becoming the standard for many do-it-all products, so what's different here? Well, once you hook it up to your mobile device, you'll need to download the free Boss Tone Studio app to unlock the jewel in the GT's crown. The app acts as a gateway to a world of additional features: additional, touchscreen tone editing, sound management and preset downloads from Boss' tone library. But the big one is its ability to connect to YouTube and other streaming services.

The end result is that you can hear your guitar and song audio in your headphones, as well as watching video and controlling the Pocket GT: all with minimal cabling and without latency. Starting with the sounds, it seems almost complacent to brush over the fact that we have access to so many great-sounding tones coming from a rechargeable battery-powered box the size of – you guessed it – an iPhone.

But, here we are: they're great, with plenty of useable presets straight out of the box you've got enough clean/crunch/hi-gain amps, as well as a whole host of drive, modulation, pitch, filter and time-based effects to play with. Boss has even included some digitised versions of old classics such as the Slow Gear and Feedbacker pedals. But the big sell from Boss is the connectivity and integration with YouTube.

First, we made the mistake of loading the app and connecting to the MIDI side (used for sending control messages between your phone and the Pocket GT) of the Bluetooth connection before the audio. Don't do this, unless you want to find yourself in a tedious spiral of resetting/switching off Bluetooth and rebooting your device. Connect to the audio side, and it's plain sailing. The phrase 'RTFM' springs to mind...

Once you're hooked up properly, though, the Pocket GT is a breeze. You can edit and store presets a lot easier than using the GT's on-board controls, manage and download presets, and most importantly add videos to the Session section by pasting-in the video URL.

We loaded up a number of *Total Guitar's* YouTube lessons and tracks and got busy learning and jamming, just as promised! What's more, you can set up markers within the song that can in-turn be used to create looped sections, and can even act as switching points. This way, the Pocket GT will take you from, say, a clean sound to screaming lead automatically as you play through the track without you needing to take your hands off the guitar. It's a well thought out way of allowing you to practice, and actually, could serve as a performance tool for buskers or guitarists performing to backing tracks.

The internal battery time is a solid four hours, which means you'll probably be charging this every other day or so, but fortunately you can still use the unit while it's charging (it's a micro-USB socket). There's a lot to get your head around because it does so much. We're not complaining, though. If extended home-time is in store for us all, products like this are sure to make it more bearable.

▶ VERDICT

YouTube and streaming platform connectivity makes the Boss Pocket GT a formidable tool for practice, and of course you have all that great modelling tech under the hood making the tones sound solid, too.

▶ PROS

- Super-compact device.
- Amp and FX modelling tech is top-notch.
- YouTube streaming connectivity is fun and useful.

▶ CONS

- You'll need to study the manual first.

▶ CONTACT

Roland Australia
Ph: (02) 9982 8266
Web: roland.com/au

PRS SE CUSTOM 24 + 24-08

TWO DECADES ON, PRS'S SE RANGE IS OUT-SELLING THE USA CORE MODELS BY SOME MARGIN. LET'S DROP IN ON A PAIR OF GROWN-UP 2021 MODELS. REVIEW BY **DAVE BURRLUCK**.

RRP: $1,449 (24) / $1,649 (24-08)

To kick off 2021, PRS has chosen to launch three additions to its SE line: our two review models and a classy makeover of the consistently-selling Zach Myers with its semi-hollow body construction. Our SE Customs are refined and, in the case of the 24-08, tweaked. Both feature what PRS calls a "shallow violin carve" to the maple tops, which we first saw on 2019's SE Paul's Guitar and which moves the appearance slightly closer to the more heavily dished USA-made Core models.

And if the 24-08 looks familiar, yes, it's already a Core model and it's also pretty similar to last year's SE 35th Anniversary Custom. Custom Style While it might be the guitar that launched PRS back in 1985, this latest SE version (now made by Cor-Tek in Indonesia) is considerably different.

That glued-in maple neck, with its natural headstock, actually looks more like the USA-made CE 24 bolt-on. So, is this essence of the classic Custom 24 or a flavour in its own right? Well, a bit of both actually, if we're honest. But let's forget the backstory for a moment and concentrate on what you'll get for your money here.

Not surprisingly, the SE Custom centres on the classic PRS ingredients: a 635-millimetre (25-inch) scale length, 24 frets, vibrato and dual humbuckers that can be coil-split. It remains a 'do-it-all' platform, combining elements of the obvious classics with what is now a hugely recognisable aesthetic. That shallow violin carve to the figured maple top (actually a veneer over solid maple) does add a little more of the real PRS style, but the light dishing occurs in just a small, approximately 30-millimetre wide portion around the edge; the majority of the top is flat. Compare that with the CE 24 – which, again, uses a lesser dished top carve than the Core models – and you'll see actually how 'shallow' the SE carve is. Mind you, you can't knock the craft.

The edges of the vividly coloured veneer are really very clean and it's the only colour on the guitar: the sides, back and entire neck (with the exception of the rosewood fingerboard) are clear gloss coated. And while PRS built its empire with the use of one-piece necks and one-piece bodies, here both are multi-piece out of necessity. The neck is actually a three-piece longitudinal laminate of maple – the two outer sections diagonally matched either side of that rift-sawn centre piece. The USA-made S2 and bolt-on PRSes, including the Silver Sky, use a scarf-jointed headstock and a heel stack.

The bodies here are a very light coloured mahogany and both are three-piece. The overall body depth is a shade over 46mm, very slightly deeper than our 44-millimetre-thick CE 24, which actually looks thinner at the rim because of its more graduated top carve. You can't expect the same hardware here that you'll see on those USA Core models and, although the tuners, strap buttons and football jack plate do look a bit generic, the PRS-designed vibrato is the same that's used on PRS's S2-level guitars, not to mention our $3K-plus CE 24.

This well tried-and-tested design sits parallel to the guitar's top (with its push-in, tension-adjustable arm and characteristic 'keyhole' saddles) and is cast, or 'moulded' as PRS prefers, as opposed to the machined stock of the Core level vibratos. Both top plate and block are steel; the Core-level vibrato is brass. So, yes, while different, these SEs certainly uphold the PRS detail statement. There is not a hair out of place and even comparing the figure of these veneered maple tops to the solid figured maple of our reference CE, well, they're certainly not wildly different.

The construction on both our Customs is identical; the differences (colour options aside) lie in the pickups and their switching. The Custom 24 uses the PRS-designed/Indonesian-made 'S' versions of the more modern-sounding 85/15 humbuckers. These have regular-shaped humbucker bobbins, unlike the proprietary rectangular bobbins of the USA versions – so-called 'squabbins' by PRS-ophiles. They sit in standard mounting rings, too, and look like generic humbuckers with a single row of slot-head poles and a single row of non-adjustable slugs.

The Custom 24-08s have zebra bobbins and are referred to as TCI 'S' humbuckers, presumably similar to those on the SE Paul's Guitar. The 24 has a three-way lever switch with master volume and tone and there's a pull-switch on the latter that voices both slug coils simultaneously. The 24-08 uses a three-way toggle switch for pickup selection with two small-tipped mini-toggle switches, so you can coil-split each pickup independently. The 24 then offers six sounds, but the mini-toggles on the 24-08 mean we can combine the bridge humbucker with the neck single coil, and vice versa, accounting for the two extra sounds and the name.

After 35 years of making the Custom, PRS should know how to do it by now, right? Both these 'offshore' models certainly capture the style and taste, and not for the first time the progression in quality and sound of the SE seriously challenges older USA models.

The Wide Thin neck is eminently playable, even though its relatively slim depth (approximately 20 millimetres at the first fret and 22.5 at the 12th) might put off the big neck brigade. Like the sounds we hear, these guitars cover an awful lot of ground. If we're picky we'd love the satin neck feel that we have on our CE 24, and while that would be a pretty easy after-purchase mod, frankly, the more we play the more such thoughts disappear.

As ever, brand-new guitars need a little time to settle, and of the two our 24-08 takes a little while and some extra string stretching. But both have identical setups, each fret mirror-polished, the fingerboard edges lightly rolled. C'mon, this is very good craft. Obviously, we're in the same ballpark sound-wise, and to generalise we have a sort of slightly hot vintage-y voice in humbucker mode that suits a multitude of uses. The more we swap between the guitars the more subtlety we hear.

To split hairs, the Custom 24 seems to have slightly more stridency to its voice; the 24-08 is slightly softer, which many of us might call a tad more vintage-y. The Custom 24's coil-splits are perfectly usable, primarily on neck and in mix positions, which certainly supplies some expected Fender-y bounce and funk. The 24-08, though, sounds very slightly sweeter.

Both really benefit from pulling the tone control back a little – the volume, too, which keeps things clear when reduced but doesn't overly 'enhance' the treble response. While we can't speak for everyone, both guitars in single-coil mode benefited from both tone and volume roll-off just to reduce that presence.

Conversely, and of particular note if you're using lashings of modulation/delays, that presence can really enhance what you hear with both controls on full. Let's be honest: the two extra sounds of the 24-08 are subtle but noticeable. Those two very discreet mini-toggles are really fast and intuitive – you just need to remember humbucking is 'down'/away from you and single coil is 'up'.

The pull-switch on the Custom 24, of course, is fine – we've used that plenty of times over the years – but we have to be honest and say we really like the setup of the 24-08. If we were to pigeonhole, the Custom 24 model comes across as a very rock-ready humbucker guitar with single-coil splits if you need them; the 24-08 is slightly more balanced, a guitar that excels at both.

The past year has seen high demand for PRS guitars, which makes virtually any criticism or observation redundant. There will be plenty of guitar players, for example, who would enjoy a more 'working player's' version of either of these in opaque colours, such as a black or gold-top with less ostentatious inlays. But with such demand for its core classic style, sorry, that isn't going to happen! In short, the SE line has the wind behind it. Great design, beautiful execution and sounds that just continue to evolve: a serious amount of guitar for the money.

▶ VERDICT

Two great designs, perfectly executed with immaculate builds, the PRS SE Custom 24 and 24-08 are a testament to the good health of the SE project and offer two very serious guitars for the money. The 24-08 just shades it for its switching options and tone, but either way these are a triumph.

▶ PROS

- Seriously well-sorted Custom with not a hair out of place.
- It's impossible to question the craft.
- Custom has versatile rock-ready sounds with good coil-splits.
- Slightly sweeter sounds and expanded switching edges it for the Custom 24-08.

▶ CONS

- We'd love a less showy looking version.
- No left-handed Custom 24-08.

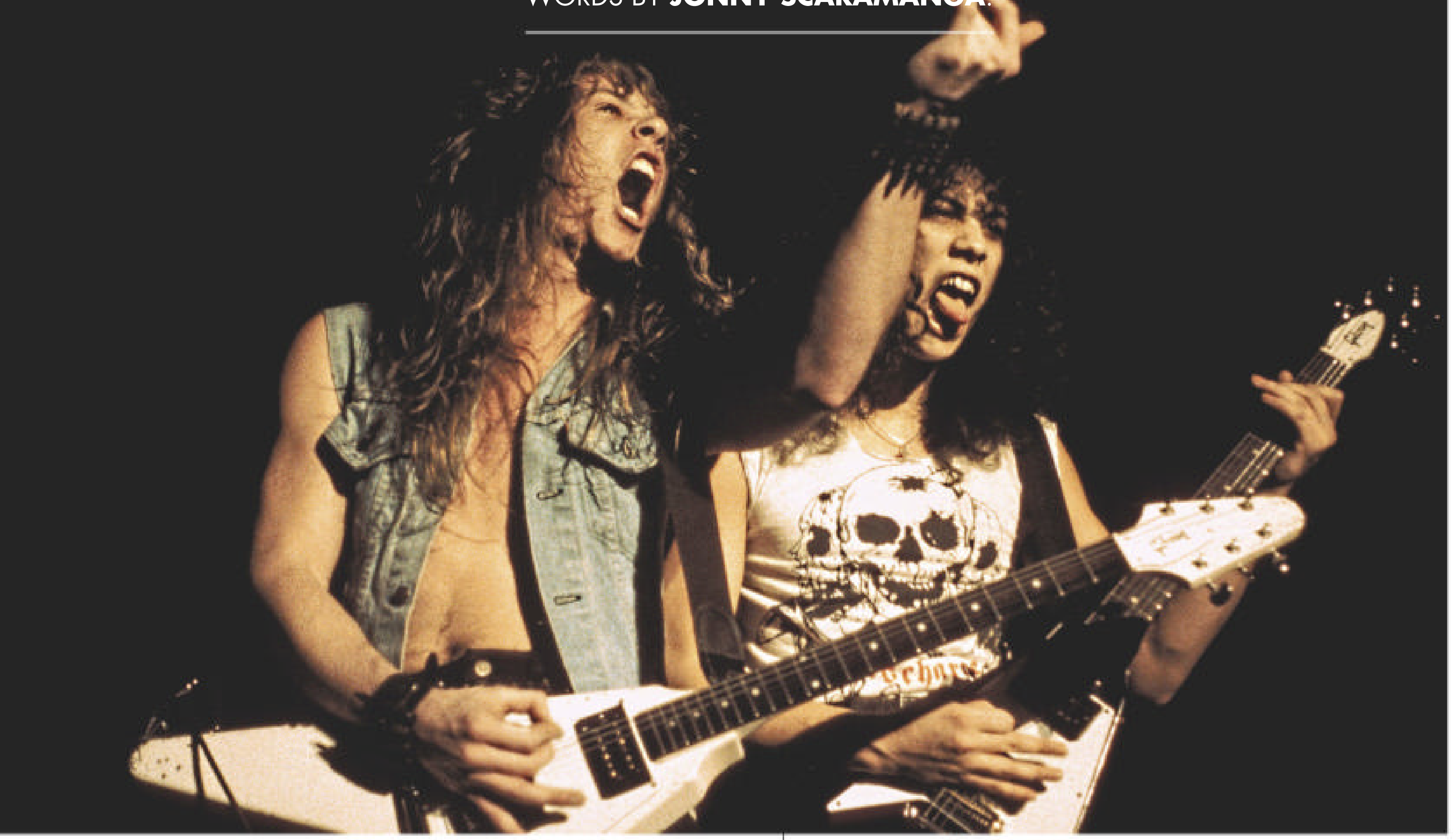
▶ CONTACT

Electric Factory
Ph: (03) 9474 1000
Web: elfa.com.au

THE (SUPPOSED) DEATH OF THE GUITAR SOLO

WITH GUITAR SOLOS ABSENT FROM THE CHARTS, GREEN DAY CHAMPIONING THE ANTI-SOLO AND EDDIE VAN HALEN GONE, IS IT THE END FOR THE FRET-MELTING GUITAR HERO?

WORDS BY **JONNY SCARAMANGA**



The guitar solo has been declared dead many times. Late-'70s punks actively tried to kill it, bored by 20-minute stadium rock indulgences. In the early '80s, some critics declared that the electric guitar itself was finished, replaced by the synthesiser. That prediction turned out comically wrong as the decade produced shred, Johnny Marr and a US alt-rock scene that went mainstream in the '90s.

In the '90s, according to critics, solos were facing the mortuary slab once more. This did not, however, stop them from appearing in the biggest alternative rock hits of the decade, such as Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit", Pearl Jam's "Alive", or even Weezer's "Buddy Holly". Dying, it would appear, did little to deter the guitar solo. In the early 2000s, having recovered from nasty bouts of death in the preceding decades, solos again looked old hat.

Who could forget Kirk Hammett's crestfallen face in "Some Kind Of Monster" as his bandmates told him the new album would contain no solos? In the event, Metallica produced their most reviled work. Young bands like Trivium and Avenged Sevenfold promptly filled the vacuum, ripping out the kind of solos we wished had been on St Anger.

Now the guitar solo again looks ill-fated. Last year, Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong appeared on *Total Guitar's* cover proclaiming the era of the anti-solo, going so far as to say, "I just feel like no one's got the time to listen to a guitar solo anymore." A 2019 *Rolling Stone* editorial pondered the end of the era, pointing out that guitar solos on mainstream records are now vanishingly rare.

If you plugged in a guitar in 1952, virtually anything you played would have been an unprecedented new sound. Today you could play non-stop for a year without stumbling upon something that hasn't been done. But it's a mistake to think the guitar is a spent force, because you never know when a visionary will upset everything you think you know. There's a reason we think of Hendrix, Van Halen, and Tom Morello so vividly. Each arrived when we thought we had a handle on what guitars could do, and each shredded our preconceptions (pun intended).

One day, maybe every variation of sound it's possible to get from an electric guitar will have been made. But the electric guitar's appeal has never been pure novelty, or it wouldn't have had such a world changing first century. The blues greats, who gave us the guitar solo as we know it, were famed for their emotional connection with the instrument. Lead guitar offers a raw form of expression, with musicians communicating their deepest feelings. That isn't going away.

#GuitarSolo has 2.7 million posts on Instagram and 207 million views on TikTok. Searching 'guitar solo' produces 50 million hits on YouTube. Clearly, guitar solos are alive. What they are not, however, is mainstream. It is hard to imagine Cardi B or Billie Eilish employing Nita Strauss for a face-melting modern equivalent of "Beat It".

But worrying about this ignores two facts: first, electric guitar music has always been in the minority on the radio. Guitarists remember the 1980s as a halcyon decade, but from 1980-1989, not a single end-of-year UK chart topper featured a lead break.

Second, nothing is mainstream anymore. There's no TV channel everyone watches, no radio station everyone listens to. There are a million Spotify playlists for new music, and no one is on all of them. The electric guitar is a minority interest, but so is owning a hamster. This does not mean that hamsters are dying out. When people proclaim the death of the solo, they mean it is over as a cultural force, that it will never again be the voice of youth. Kids in the 1960s loved rock 'n' roll in part because their parents hated it. When your dad is encouraging you to take guitar lessons so you can learn "Sweet Child O' Mine", the vibe is not the same.

One band recognising the need to shake things up is Polyphia. "The only way to keep shred alive was to kill it and bring it back to life our own way," says guitarist Scott LePage. It's this attitude that makes their music so fresh. It's a view shared by blues upstart Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram, who told us, "I can't be the kid wonder forever. We're all evolving, and I just want to keep playing and keep pushing forward." Listening to the next generation, you get no sense that there is nowhere left to go.

There's one really good reason to think that guitar solos can still surprise us. Until now, the famous ones have been made almost exclusively by men, mostly from the US and UK. It's notable that some of the most exciting guitarists of today are women: Nita Strauss, Erja Lyytinen, and Yvette Young among them. The internet means that guitarists from more countries are coming to prominence as well, including Brazil's Mateus Asato and Lari Basilio, Japan's Ichika Nito, and Niger's Mdou Moctar.

That increasing diversity means a bigger pool of ideas and more chances for new sounds to emerge. It would be arrogant to assume all the guitar's possibilities have been explored when so far only a tiny slice of the population has even tried. Growing diversity means that we have to expand our ideas of what a 'guitar solo' sounds like. Yvette Young's inventive breaks bear no resemblance to blues rock, but there's no doubt they are dazzling.

It's telling that Yvette says she never listens to guitar music. "I only listen to bands and composers. My piano upbringing – the two-handed tapping I play, I approach the guitar just how I'd approach writing polyphony on a piano." If you want innovative guitar music, you shouldn't be surprised when the results don't remind you of Eric Clapton.

Other cultures could introduce brand new sounds. In October 2020, users in Nepal were among the most likely to Google 'guitar solo'. Nepalese music commonly uses microtones (pitches in between the frets). As it's mostly in western culture where solos have thrived until now, there is still a world of potential for guitar innovation.

One avenue for originality is in the realm of actual solo guitar – unaccompanied pieces. Besides Eruption, almost all classic guitar 'solos' are played with bands. Innovators like Mateus Asato and Ichika make stunning compositions for guitar alone. Without having to blend with other instruments, they are free to roam wherever they please, but they also have to find new ways to fill the space normally occupied by the rhythm section. And by becoming stars on social media, they're also changing ideas about where we find guitar heroes. There's also the possibility that we're just looking in the wrong places.

When guitar solos disappear in one genre, they usually pop up in another. In the late '90s, the metal press wondered where all the guitar solos had gone, with Korn and Limp Bizkit playing as though their top three strings were missing. Yet on 1999's biggest single, "Smooth", Carlos Santana barely stopped soloing long enough for Rob Thomas to get the lyrics out. Meanwhile in 2021, if guitar solos are out of vogue someone should have told country musicians.

More electric guitars have been sold in the last 12 months than ever before. There's every reason to expect that one of those guitars has gone to the next Matt Bellamy or Yvette Young. But more importantly, all of them have gone to people who will use the instrument to express themselves and make themselves happy. Ultimately, guitar solos come from rebellious subcultures, so it would be weird to care what anyone else thinks.

Do you still like guitar solos? Cool. Us too.

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